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Back to the Old Country

First Book:
Last of the Shtetl Litvaks

by

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Back to the Old Country

Tour Book:

Last of the Silent Liberals

by

David Rae

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This book is affectionately dedicated to Chic Wolk, in admiration for his generosity in helping the last poor, forgotten Holocaust survivors of East European towns and villages. When others balked at the lack of tax-exempt charities that deal with this tragically neglected issue, Chic spontaneously paraphrased the ancient Jewish adage of Hillel: "If I don't do what I can, who will, and if not now, when?"

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NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

Transcriptions used in this book are meant to reflect the East European Ashkenazic tradition, and the Lithuanian pronunciations within it, rather than Israeli based variants.

In citations of actual Yiddish words and text, the standard YIVO transcription system is generally used (*ey* as in th*ey*, *ay* as in wr*i*te, *kh* as in *Kh*ayim, *e* for unstressed vowel) and such items are usually in italics. Sometimes an acute accent is added to show which syllable of a word is stressed.

For personal names, places and concepts, and items which have gained some currency in English, a more popular English version is used (*ei* as in *ei*ght, *ai* as in wr*i*te, *ch* as in *Ch*aim, word-final *a* for unstressed final vowels in female names and most place names, occasional *ee* as in str*ee*t).

Consistency of principle is occasionally sacrificed for the English reader's ease and comfort.

Origins of these Journeys

What is a *Litvak*?

A "Lithuanian Jew."

And who is a Lithuanian Jew? Someone who was born on (or hails from) the territory that Jews call *Lita* (pronounced LIH-teh in Yiddish). And, in some cases, it is used by people who would like to be part of the club (and occasionally, about other people, as praise or insult, as the case may be).

From Elijah the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797) to Marc Chagall (1887—1985), from Chaim of Valozhin (1749—1821) to Chaim Soutine (1893—1943), Litvaks have made a name for themselves with their contributions to both Jewish and wider culture. They considered themselves the intellectual elite of East European Jewry, of which they were, numerically speaking, a definite minority.

Although their love of learning and simplicity of appearance and lifestyle were admired, the Litvaks are also lambasted in Yiddish folklore for being coldish, dryish, overly critical (biting satire is the speciality), a little haughty, and perhaps less given to pure belief than the Jews of the southern regions of Eastern Europe. Like all stereotypes, it's just not fair. But, there's something in it. . .

At several of the peace conferences meant to bring an end to the post World War I fighting in the east between the newly emerged states, the delegate for Lithuania (declared a state in 1918), demanded, only half in jest, all the territory that Jews call Lithuania for the new republic. His name, by the way, was Deputy Foreign Minister Shimshen Rosenbaum.

Now if a place called Lita — Jewish Lithuania — really exists, where on earth is it, if it's not on any official map? Well, maps don't have to reflect only the political and military powers

that be (or were). They can reflect *cultural territory*, even of a stateless minority (see the map at the start of this book).

And, the map of Lita covers a vast territory, including all of what is now Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia, along with some little bits and pieces of westernmost Russia, northernmost Ukraine, northeastern Poland and some of Estonia.

As a European culture with no army and no navy, Yiddish culture could freely develop its own geographical concepts, and so it did. But not out of the thin air. A peek at medieval maps of eastern Europe promptly reveals that Lita occupies real space not dissimilar to the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, especially in the days of Grand Duke Gedymin (known in Lithuanian as Gediminas; he lived approximately from 1275 to 1341). He made a town called Vilna, on the banks of the Vilia River, into his capital in 1323. After hundreds of years of cultural development, its Jewish minority, with no swords or spears, but an almost obsessive passion for learning and scholarship as the highest aspirations, made the city into the Jerusalem of Lithuania (or Jerusalem of the North, as Napoleon dubbed it). For several hundred years, up to the Holocaust, Vilna was the world center of both traditional rabbinic and modern, innovative Jewish culture.

Gedymin's grandson, Vitold the Great, who lived from 1350 to 1430, issued charters of rights in 1388 and 1389 that are among the most remarkable documents in European history. While the more "developed" countries in central Europe were sinking in religious hatred and mass murder of Jews (the Crusades, the Rindfleisch massacres, the Black Plague, and numerous local massacres and expulsions), Vitold (or Witold; he's known as Vytautas in the Lithuanian language) issued his Charter to the Jews of Brest (1388), and Troki and Grodna (1389). His bill of rights was not at all in the spirit of western "protecting the Christ-killers because we need them" edicts. The charter of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania has some quite modern sounding proclamations of human rights. These include equality before the law (Jews are permitted to buy and sell on the same basis as Christians, §37); religious minority recognition (a Jew may take an oath in court on the Old Testament, §19), and the idea that oppressed minorities

need that extra bit of protection (a Christian neighbor who fails to respond to a Jew calling for help must pay a fine, §36).

Many of these rights and privileges are derived from earlier Polish charters, the most famous of which is Boleslav the Pious's Statute of Kalish (Kalisz) of 1264. What made Lithuania special, and its atmosphere for minorities one of the best in the world at that time, was its status as an empire and at the same time, a pagan culture. A lot of that culture persisted even after the official conversion to Christianity in 1387. It may not be politically correct to say so, but if the truth is to be told, virtually all the great religions have gone through periods of horrific bloody tyranny (witness the historical books of the Old Testament, the medieval and not so medieval Church, certain branches of Islam, and more). Paganism inherently comprises more *potential* for tolerance toward this or that faith, and on the tolerance scale, it can therefore be much closer to modern notions of human rights and freedoms than the established religions.

So, it wasn't for nothing that Jews considered Vitold to be the "Cyrus of Lithuania," a reference to the sixth century BC king of Persia, who in the Biblical account, enabled the return of the Jews to their land. Traditional Jews have had what some culture historians call "vertical orientation" going back in time rather than outward in space. Or, to say it in plain English, a long memory.

But the Jews of medieval Europe did not aspire to any return to sovereignty in the ancient land of Israel by means of military quest; that was an aspiration that would await the Messiah's coming. They did aspire to tolerance of their own, very literate, text-based Jewish civilization, founded on the belief in the divine origin of the Five Books of Moses, and recognition of the ultimate authority of a rabbinic tradition going back roughly to the start of the common era.

The ethnic Lithuanians are a Baltic people, and their language is a very ancient European tongue showing affinity with Sanskrit, much more than with the surrounding Slavonic languages. They were (and are) concentrated in the far west of the territory of the Grand Duchy. That Duchy was a truly multicultural empire, and as an irony of history would have it,

Lithuanian Yiddish is the only language ever to have been spoken throughout the Duchy. The corollary of that is, that in some sense of language, space, culture and time, the Litvaks, as products of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, are every bit as much Lithuanian, in *that* "Grand Duchy sense" — or more so — than even the Lithuanians. Leave it to the Jews.

The Litvaks (LITT-vaks, Yiddish LITT-va-kehs), as Jews of Lita are known, have thought themselves to be a distinct entity, not to be confused, firstly and foremostly, with the Jews down south, in Poland, the Ukraine, Hungary and further afield.

To start with, a real Litvak is recognized in a split second by his or her Lithuanian Yiddish. Its pronunciation "happens" to be closest to modern literary Yiddish than any other dialect. "Happens" in inverted commas because there are no coincidences in cultural history; both the Hebrew and Yiddish pronunciation of the north preserve the ancient vowel qualities more conservatively and had been invested with a certain prestige for many centuries. From a scientific point of view, there are of course no worse or better natural dialects, but societies come up with their notions of right and wrong for all sorts of known and unknown reasons.

The difference in dialects is a little bit like "a clock of vowels" that has been turned at each mark by one notch. The Lithuanian Yiddish *o* is most often Polish Yiddish *u*, the *u* is *i*, the *e* — *ey*, the *ey* — *ay*, the *ay* — *aa*, and so forth. So, while there is mutual intelligibility, nearly every word is markedly different. The Litvak's "Sh*o*lem-al*ey*khem, v*u* bist*u* h*ay*nt gev*e*n?" ("Hello, where have you been today?") is, in Polish Yiddish, "Sh*u*lem-al*ay*khem, v*i* bist*i* h*aa*nt gev*ey*n?"

Nevertheless, the Litvak variety too has its very non-standard features, mostly the confusing of *s* and *sh* (giving the dialect its humorous name, *sábesdiker losn,* literally, "Sabbath language," but, in this context, referring to the dialect area where Yiddish *shabes* (Sabbath) sounds like *sabes*, and *loshn* (language) like *losn*, in the land of the Litvaks.

Litvaks often have *ey* where the standard has *oy*. One humorous result is that word for "to live somewhere" —*voynen,* is pronounced *veynen,* rendering it identical to the word to for "to

cry." Ever industrious when it came to overcoming such impediments, the Jews of Vilna would ask one another "Vu freyste zikh?" (literally, "Where do you rejoice?") when they wanted to ask someone's address. Those in Pinsk came up with another solution: "Vu lakhste?" ("Where do you laugh?").

On the musical side of things, Polish Yiddish is considered the most musical dialect, with Ukrainian running a close second. The Litvak is supposed to be not very musical and the dialect tends to be spoken at great speed in rhythms likened to a zooming train passing by (and don't bother asking for slow motion repeats).

If you happen to be of East European Jewish origin, and you still have Yiddish speaking relatives whose dialect is native to the region of your origins, just ask them how to say "grandmother" in Yiddish. If it's *bobbe*, you're a Litvak, and if it's *bubbe* (or just conceivably, *babbe*), you're a southerner. If you've been excluded from the grand duchy of Litvaks, you can find out more by asking how to say "beautiful." If it's *sheyn* (rhyming with "main") you are of Ukrainian Jewish descent (itself comprising Podolian, Bessarabian and Rumanian branches). If however it's *shayn* (like "shine" but with a shorter diphthong) then you are "Polish" (hailing from deep Poland, Hungary, or thereabouts). To the Litvak, you are in either case a "Galitsyaner" (Galician). That's because to the Litvak, all others are "Galitsyaner." In fact, historic Galicia (an area including Cracow and Lemberg) is split between Ukrainian and Polish Yiddish. It is the area largely ceded to the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time of the first partition of Poland in 1772.

To academic Yiddishologists, Polish Yiddish is Mideastern or Central Yiddish; Ukrainian is Southeastern and Lithuanian is Northeastern Yiddish. But, given the relative similarity of Polish and Ukrainian, and the folkloristics of the Litvaks' freezing environs (and hearts), the notion of a north (Litvak) — south (non-Litvak) divide is popular both among scholars and "normal people." And when a classification is popular across *that* divide, it must have something going for it.

As usual, differences in dialect between one place and another correspond rather well with differences in other spheres of

life. From the architecture of wooden synagogues to the method of preparing fish, the Litvaks differ from their Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Rumanian and other southerly neighbors.

But it was even more than language, architecture and food that set the Litvaks apart. When, in the eighteenth century, the ecstatic-mystical Jewish religious movement known as Hasidism won the hearts and minds of much of the Jewish population of the southern parts of Jewish Eastern Europe — the Ukraine, and Poland — the Litvaks, led by one of the greatest Talmudic scholars ever, Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797) waged war against it, sticking to the old values of rabbinic learning as the highest endeavor. In fact, most Litvaks were *misnágdim*, a word which translates, funnily enough, as "protestants" (from the Hebrew root *neged* which means against). They were protesting against the innovations of Hasidism. And, from that point of view, they were the Catholics sticking to an older tradition while the Hasidim were actually the protesting rebels, but leave it to Yiddish to use the notion "protestants" for the protesters-against-the-protesters.

In the eastern parts of Lita, however, a special brand of Lithuanian Hasidism arose which sought to combine the scholarly ideals of the Litvaks with the zeal, exuberance and belief in a spiritual leader called a *rebbe*, of the Hasidim. The most famous form of this hybrid, "Lithuanian Hasidism" is known as Lubavitch, after the village, not far from Vitebsk, where the dynasty was moved early in the nineteenth century, from a nearby village Lyadi, whence it was moved from yet another town, Lyozna, by its founder, Shneur-Zalmen (1745—1813), the first Lubavitcher rebbe (retrospectively speaking). He was a native of Lyozna (where, incidentally, Chagall was later to be born). His progeny have been known as *The Schneersohns* ever since.

From the early nineteenth century onward, Lita became one of the major centers for the new "European" forms of Jewish culture. These new forms entailed the fusion of Jewish culture with European genres and categories. The creators of the modern Hebrew novel (Avrom Mapu, 1808—1867), the modern Yiddish novel (Mendele Moykher Sforim [originally Sholem-Yankev

Abramovitsh], 1838—1917), the modern Hebrew language (Eliezer ben Yehuda [originally Leizer-Itsik Perlman, 1858—1922]) were all "stubborn Litvaks."

Then came another tier of Litvak leaders who were not satisfied with contributions to Jewish culture, life, and literature, but who wanted to create a better world. They include the inventor of Esperanto, Ludwik-Lejzer Zamenhof (1859—1917), and the founders of the Jewish Labor *Bund,* the major Jewish socialist organization that linked up with the Russian revolutionary movements. It was created at a secret Vilna meeting in October of 1897.

The majority of Litvaks, like the majority of Jews throughout eastern Europe, lived in a *shtetl.*

What is a shtetl? From the paintings of the *Litvak* Marc Chagall, the stories of the *Polish* Jew Isaac Bashevis Singer, and the play *Fiddler on the Roof* based on the works of the *Ukrainian* Jewish humorist Sholem Aleichem, a certain romantic image emerges. The Jewish civilization of the shtetl, like most of East European Jewry, was brutally wiped out during the Holocaust, the worst case of mass genocide in human history. It is only natural that a mystique has arisen about what it was. Academics, forever dreaming up new funding applications for conference topics, have convened various solemn convocations to examine whether the shtetl ever existed, or is, perhaps a romantic post-Holocaust construct.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1956. My father, and best friend, Yiddish poet Menke Katz (1906—1991), whom I took, at a very young age to calling by his first name, Menke (MAIN-keh), would tell me stories every day about his shtetl, Michaleshik (mi-CHA-leh-shik), not far from Vilna. We would usually talk in our special booth (or *vínkale*, as Menke called it, using the loving Yiddish diminutive that could translate "special corner") in Bernie's candy store (New-Yorkese for a café cum newsagent with

a soda counter as well as tables-in-booths) on New Utrecht Avenue, in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn (since "renamed" Boro Park, and still one of the few neighborhoods in the city without a park). He would always have a new story about Michaleshik.

The world he told me about, its kabbalists, rabbis, wandering beggars, and love affairs, was a world of Godliness as well as Sin. One thing for sure, it was an incomparably more compelling reality than the gray streets of Brooklyn. My friends at school could not understand why I was not in the least interested in baseball. I had a stock phrase from way back when: a bunch of grown men running around after a ball, feh!

Menke's grandfather (my great-grandfather) Aaron-Velvel Gubersky was a mighty timberman who turned the trees of the nearby forest of Zabortsh into rafts that were floated down the Vilia River to Vilna, then Kovna, then the Baltic Sea, destined to become chairs, tables and houses. Aaron-Velvel's end came when he was attacked by robbers on a forest wagon path. A mighty bearded Jew, he managed to beat off his attackers to the last man, but returned home to Michaleshik mortally wounded, and lived only a few more days.

As a boy, Menke witnessed the murder of our cousin Yankele, stabbed in the heart by another Jewish teenager in Michaleshik over a girl. The murderer, Itske, was the son of Chonke the village doctor, and he therefore knew precisely where the heart was. He sharpened the murder-knife at the smithy of his victim's father, Chaim the blacksmith (our uncle *Chaim der shmid*). He drew the knife from his boot, twisted it into Yankale's heart on a Friday evening on the way to synagogue. The very same night, the culprit and his family swam across the mighty Vilia River. They eventually made it to America, where the murderer became a heart surgeon somewhere in California (our family has boycotted California ever since, in a show of classic Litvak stubbornness). And, to make matters worse, Michaleshik lost its one doctor, Chonke, a world-class expert on the medicinal qualities of leeches (*pyáfkes* in Yiddish).

Menke's uncle Bentke, one of Aaron-Velvel's ten children, was the family prankster. He was sent to America because his final prank was one too many. There were others who glued the rabbi's beard to the table during a nap. But only one Bentke had the audacity to listen outside a window to a dying man's last week of intimate words with his wife. Three days after the funeral, Bentke, a master mimic, turned up at midnight at the widow's house dressed in a white sheet and pointed cap: "Let me in, for God's sake, it's cold out there in the cemetery!" The widow went screaming to the rabbi: *A shed, a shed!* ("A ghost, a ghost"). That was when his father said: "Michaleshik has suffered enough from him. Let America suffer from him!" By sending Bentke into the bleak exile of *di goldene medíne* ("the golden land" — America), old Aaron-Velvel helped solidify the American satellite base of the family, in the usual pattern of people emigrating "to" already emigrated relations. He thereby helped save many from the Holocaust (or in my case, of not ever existing, but who is to know what kind of fate that is). Bentke went on to become a master gambler in Clifton, New Jersey. The huge free-standing piece-of-furniture radio he won off the local chief of police, its sliding doors that cover the inside works still shiny, stands proudly in my mother's house.

And then there was the break-in at the village studyhouse. Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, could only be studied by scholars over the age of forty according to a widespread Jewish edict. But the boys of Michaleshik had no patience. They tricked Chaim the Blacksmith into making a skeleton key, and stealthily made their way one night into the *bismédresh* (studyhouse, also used for daily prayers), and opened a tome of Kabbalah to a chapter about seven heavens. They, poor children near starvation during World War I, chose the Heaven of Manna, the magic food that God had provided for the Children of Israel during the forty year trek through the desert from Egypt to the promised land. (Many years later, in New York, Menke was to call his first book in English *Land of Manna*, harking back to this childhood episode.)

Although he spoke mostly about Michaleshik, Menke was actually born in the much bigger and more modern town Svintsyan (svints-YAN), which was in fact the "county seat." But he always

considered Michaleshik much more important because it was where the family (on his mother's side, the Guberskys) had lived for six hundred years. "I just happened to be born in Svintsyán. My parents moved there just before I was born. The roots are much more important than where you were born yourself." Maybe Menke didn't know it, and maybe I didn't know it, but that idea was being subliminally transferred to me from the earliest age.

His father had come from a third village, Svir, famous in Yiddish folklore for the curse *Zolst geshvoln vern vi der Svirer barg* ("May you become as swollen as the Hill of Svir!).

Menke's closest childhood friend was his eldest brother Eltshik. Eltshik was in love with a neighbor, Dveirka, on Poshmena Street in Svintsyan. Menke was the witness when they swore eternal love at the opened holy ark of the Old Studyhouse of Svintsyan. Soon afterwards, Eltshik was taken for forced labor by the occupying German army. Some months later, the well known beggar of those parts, Chaim-Meir of Svir, came knocking at the door of the family's house, at 27 Poshmena, to say that he had seen Eltshik sick with typhus in the German labor camp in a village called Buvitz. Menke's mother Badonna took Menke, and together they started on the long road by foot to find Eltshik.

After trekking until late at night, they were given lodging in the hut of a generous elderly Lithuanian woman in the hamlet Shimeníshik, who stayed up till dawn with the terrified Jewish mother and son, assuring them that they would find Eltshik. They did find Eltshik the next day in an abandoned barrack in Buvitz, dead, his hand clutching a diary of love letters to Dveirka. His body was stacked with others that had been used as sandbags to absorb incoming Russian fire. Dveirka never married, forever citing her youthful oath of eternal love of 1917, right up until her death (she was among the first Jews shot after the German invasion of June 1941). It was a time and place where swearing eternal love meant what it said.

It was then that Menke, brokenhearted over his brother's death, was sent to his mother's village, Michaleshik to stay with his grandfather, Aaron-Velvel, known as usual in Yiddish, simply as *der zéyde* ("the grandfather"). The famine had been worsening as

Svintsyan seemed to forever remain on the front lines of the war, while tiny villages like Michaleshik did better living off the land and the forest.

This move, from a relatively modern little city to a tiny, semi-island Jewish village embraced by the Vilia River, one that had remained largely unchanged through the ages, was probably what turned the boy into a poet for the rest of his life. To get in and out of Michaleshik, there was no railway station. You needed to yell yourself hoarse until Yoorke the ferryman came across on his old wooden barge-called-a-ferry. It ran on dragropes.

And there, in Michaleshik, Menke himself soon took ill during the Spanish Influenza plague of 1918 which killed millions. It was known in Yiddish as *di shpanke*. The renowned Jewish physician of Vilna, Dr. Tzemach Shabad (1864—1935), did what he could when he made his rounds, curing the poor of all faiths in Vilna province for free. He wasn't sure he had saved this boy. Little Menke overheard him saying "The boy may not live, I am sorry."

Menke had to leave his stern grandfather's house, where he'd been staying, so that he would not infect anyone else. *Shpanke* was highly contagious. His aunt Beilka took him in saying: "If we die, we all die together, Menke stays with us." Beilka was, as it happened, the champion storyteller of Michaleshik.

During that bout with "the *shpanke*," in a delirious fever, Menke had his first poetic vision, at around the age of eleven, when he asked God if the years due him on this earth, using King David's seventy as the yardstick, could perhaps not be reallocated, so he could come back for one day every hundred years, and that way die and yet live more or less forever.

In what was perhaps a case of nuanced teenage rebellion (so "nuanced" that nobody would ever notice), I opted for a life in the field of Yiddish, but in a branch of Yiddish very far from my father's poetry and shtetl stories. It was to be technical Yiddish

philology, and even within that discipline, I kept as far as possible from anything to do with Lithuania, going for work on the origins of the Hebrew and Aramaic elements in the language on its original German speaking territory a thousand years ago, reconstruction of proto-Yiddish vowel systems, medieval manuscripts, and technical dialectology. All about whether, when and how vowel 13 split off from vowel 12, and the like.

Where I was closest to Menke on matters Yiddish was our family's proud Yiddishism. Hitler's near-total annihilation of the language must not be allowed to succeed, and the language must live on. One can love America or Britain and still maintain Yiddish culture. And, one can support Israel while disagreeing with the country's history of suppressing Yiddish language, literature and culture.

At the age of fifteen, some fellow students and I asked for Yiddish to be taught as a voluntary ("elective") subject at the Brooklyn yeshiva high school (day school) where I was a pupil. The scornful reaction of the Israeli born administrators led me to start a Yiddish rebellion, in connection with which I published my first Yiddish article in the *Jewish Daily Forward* in New York in April 1972. The Yiddish newspaper, to put it mildly, was not in the habit of publishing fifteen year olds, and the editor's note assures the reader that this was written by the son of the father, not the father of the son.

In 1978, when I moved to Britain to start my doctorate, and, as it turned out, to start teaching Yiddish at Oxford, Menke and my mother, Rivka, an American-born Jewish artist, left Brooklyn for good and moved upstate to a forest house in the Shawangunk mountains, where Menke felt somehow closer to Michaleshik, and where my mother still lives.

It was during the 1980s that I began to toy with the idea of visiting Lithuania, and Michaleshik. On my visits from Oxford to my parents in their forest house in Spring Glen, New York, I would take Menke for late night rides through the roads through the forests, and he would tell me ever new stories. When I first mentioned that some colleagues were beginning to visit Eastern Europe, he was less than enthusiastic at the hint. He wanted me to

see the physical remains of Michaleshik on the one hand, but on the other, felt that close to half a century after the murder of all its Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators, it was not Michaleshik any more. It might be *Michalishki*, as it's called in Russian, but Michaleshik it's not.

I had made one visit to the Soviet Embassy in London, and after a long and humiliating wait, was told that this Michalishki, a tiny speck which the apparatchik had to look up somewhere, was in a closed military zone. I walked out deciding to live out the rest of my years with the Michaleshik of Menke's stories and poems.

But then came the Gorbachov years. More and more people were going to the places of their ancestors, and it seemed time that I, who was heading the Yiddish program at Oxford, should, plain and simple, also go and at least have a look. It was 1990 before I made my firm decision. And by then, it was easy to buy a visa. When I told Menke I was going, he was thrilled, and I began to collect things, places, hints of what to look for. I was going to Lithuania. I would see Michaleshik, Svintsyan, Svir, and of course, Vilna (now Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital).

The first person I told the news, with some naive exhilaration, was my friend Professor Harry Shukman, at a chance encounter during college lunch at St Antony's on the Woodstock Road in Oxford. Harry warned me not to expect much. "Don't let this destroy what you've been doing all your life. What the Nazis didn't destroy, the Soviets bulldozed over, and you may find there's nothing there for you. When you get sick of the Soviet gloom, go to Tallinn for a weekend to escape, it's the most western corner in the whole darned place."

I didn't realize it then, but these sobering words were to shape the next decade and more of my life. Going with the expectation of nothing meant that everything that was still there was a sort of miracle.

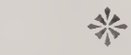
Not knowing anybody in Lithuania, I found my way to the Lithuanian legation, as it then was, in London, and was warmly received by a young gentleman and scholar called Romas Kinka. We had lunch at the Strand Palace Hotel on a rainy day in late November 1990. He gave me a thick black loose-leaf book which

he had worked hard to prepare for me. There were materials about Lithuania generally and the struggle against Soviet domination, about Jews in Lithuania, and the towns and villages I was after.

Mr. Kinka probably saw my shock when he told me that while Svintsyan (now Švenčionys) was in Lithuania, Michaleshik (Michalishki) and Svir were across the border in Belarus. I had heard of Belorussia which I always associated with a territory rather more to the east, not realizing that the border was now so close to Vilnius.

Mr. Kinka introduced me to a friend in London, a Mr. Butrimonis. He in turn made arrangements for me to stay with a charming family, a divorced mother and her university student daughter, for just over a month, in December 1990 and January 1991. I bought my ticket from Aeroflot, the Soviet state airline. The flight from London to Moscow (which you had to fly to first in those days) was not very different from an ordinary flight. But the second flight, from the filthy, smelly "internal airport" back west to Vilnius was on a tiny bumpy Soviet plane right out of an American comedy. The seats were all broken and kept seesawing back and forth from reclining to upright depending on the plane's angle. The stewardesses more or less hurled glasses of some horrific liquid at us.

As the aircraft made its descent toward Vilnius airport, I nevertheless felt a rush of euphoria and adrenalin. I was finally coming to the land of Menke, of Eltshik and Dveirka, of aunt Beilka and lamented cousin Yankele. not to mention the city of the Gaon of Vilna, which in the years between the world wars became the mecca of modern Yiddish scholarship. For some fifteen years, I had been quoting and writing about the Vilna school's view of this or that, and here the plane is actually landing there. For all the debunking which modernism has done, there is a sanctity about places that hits like a hammer when it hits, and there are few sanctities akin to returning to the land whence you hail.



At Vilnius airport a girl in her early twenties, who had that international blue-jeaned look of the university student, came up and asked in halting English if I were Mr. Katz. She was Laura Vienozhinskaite. Behind her with a broad smile was her mother, who did not speak English, Sophia Vienozhinskiene. That was my introduction to Lithuanian single and married women's family name suffixes. They had no car but had arranged for a neighbor to drive us from the airport to their small flat on Antakalnis, a large boulevard full of Soviet built apartment houses that were built-in slums. But after the filthy hallway came the spotless, beautiful apartment of the proud Lithuanian mother and daughter who treated me like a king. When Sofia discovered I was a vegetarian she quickly became a master vegetarian chef.

Many of the awkward and sometimes hilarious incidents of my first month in Lithuania were probably characteristic of the experiences of any naive westerner in the Soviet Union for the first time (the Soviet Union had another eight months or so to go). I had asked the fellow from the legation back in London whether it would not be wiser to buy a winter coat in Vilnius where the weather was colder and things are cheaper. Mr. Kinka laughed. "Dovid, err, do buy the coat in London." When I told people in Vilnius that I had asked where to buy a coat, they roared with laughter, as if some professional comedian was there to entertain. One person explained that he had to wait ten years for a new coat, another fifteen, and here this guy asks whether to buy it in London or Vilnius.

The younger of my hosts, Laura took me to Gedimino Boulevard (the recently established municipal Lithuanian authorities had already replaced the name *Lenina*, and named the main thoroughfare after the grand duke who first made it the capital). Not seeing any obvious shops or businesses, I asked "How far is it from here to the center of town?" She turned bright red. I realized my faux pas and hastily changed the subject.

But the next morning I went to work. I turned up at the 4 PM service of the one surviving synagogue, the famed *Chor-shul*, and made the acquaintance of the *shames* (a kind of beadle), Leibe Berzak (behr-ZAK), a heavy-set man with white hair and a

powerful, authoritative voice who wanted to talk only about his enemy in the synagogue who had taken over his own previous, higher, position, of *gábe* (a kind of warden). Could he help me? Sure, his relative, a nice young Jewish man, was a taxi driver who speaks Yiddish and would take me anywhere! I couldn't contain my exhilaration at this instant stroke of luck that seemed to be telling me that God is with me on this journey. But after the prayer service ended and we spoke further (the other handful of wretched old men waiting to speak to this or any other foreigner), Berzak absolutely refused to put me in touch with his Yiddish speaking taxi driving relative unless I visited his apartment. That was the man's explicit condition for helping me get to Svintsyan and Michaleshik. He didn't want any payment. I didn't understand the condition and asked, a little exasperated, why he couldn't just phone his taxi driver relative then and there. It became clear at the end of the service. He boasted to the others that this *Amerikáner* was going to get on the "traléyboos" with him, and it gave him back a certain cachet he has lost during the coup over the wardenship of this nearly empty synagogue.

I had, of course, never before seen a trolleybus before this trip. It looked like a 1960s New York bus (well, sort of), except that it ran from electrical cables up above, which send frightening sparks in all directions when it rains.

We sat together and he told me not to speak much on the bus, there were enemies everywhere. I did not feel any enmity, but I never lost sight of the idea that I was there to learn all about him and his life and world views, not to judge whether he is right or wrong about anything.

At his home this retired laborer began by giving me a lecture on Jewish history: "In 1388 the great Grand Duke of Lithuania, Vitold gave the Jews rights that encouraged many thousands to come here. And in 1941, the Lithuanians murdered the entire Jewish nation here, starting their work even before the Germans arrived! And, even after they arrived, it was the Lithuanians who did all the shooting. The Germans only photographed and filmed the mass murders. We live here among criminals, who are now being rehabilitated as great heroes against the Soviets when they

didn't lift a finger against the Soviets! Their so-called heroism consisted of murdering their Jewish neighbors and taking all the property of the victims."

I had never heard any of this. In Menke's stories and poems, the Lithuanian neighbor always appeared as goodhearted, and in the Jewish history I had studied, Lithuania was the one country in the region that never had a major pogrom. Berzak sat me down to tell me every detail of the destruction of the Jews of his native Vilkomír (now Ukmergė), and of the sequence of events from September 1939 to June 1944. It was an unforgettable lecture on Jewish history, coming from a man who may have never read a book. He did have the sense of balance to mention that hundreds of Lithuanians risked their lives to hide Jews, and in the climate here, they were much greater heroes than rescuers elsewhere. And, I was quickly able to make some compensations, for example that it would be unrealistic to expect this man to see wider geopolitical contexts, to care much about the Holocaust taking place in so many countries where there were no Lithuanians but only German occupiers. Like any down to earth individual, he knows what he knows, which is that his family and friends were butchered by members of the local population rather than by the German invaders.

Still I was left shaken. The Lithuanian intellectuals I had been meeting from day one were all charming people who wouldn't hurt the proverbial fly. It was they who now espoused western ideals of democracy and pluralism and tolerance. It was the menacing Soviet soldiers and tanks in town that were now ruining the atmosphere. But I did come to understand the mindset of the older generation of Jews and their pro-Slavic, anti-Baltic sympathies after what they lived through. And it was equally straightforward to understand the pro-Baltic anti-Slavic sympathies of those of their children who had higher education and were fulfilled people in the recreated Lithuanian milieu here. I had to put all these "thoughts like piercing arrows" on the backburner and get back to the purpose of my visit, however.

Having come to the apartment and listened to the lecture, I had earned my right of access to his relative, the young Vilnius taxi

driver and would be the best person to take me to my father's towns. Meishke Grazhul was his name. Unbeknownst to me, he had been summoned by telephone by Berzak's sister in law and came to the apartment.

This was all too good to be true. A Yiddish speaking taxi driver in his thirties. When he told me he was born in Svintsyan and knew the area inside out, that he would guard me and my possessions with his life, he knew he had his quarry, and started the bargaining process with a demand for "two hundred of *yours*," which I didn't understand. "Grine" (green ones), he continued.

Then it dawned on me that he wanted two hundred dollars for two days of driving. This was an astronomical sum out here, but very reasonable by British or American standards. Thrilled inside and out, I told him that if he did a good job, took me everywhere in good spirits, drove carefully, and all the rest, I wouldn't bargain, especially not as this man spoke Yiddish (Russianized Yiddish, but Yiddish), something I would not expect of a young Jew in the west who happened not to be hasidic, very religious, or one of my own crew (the tiny rump of secular Yiddishists born after the war).

I was amazed to learn that the universal Yiddish word for money, *gelt,* had come to mean "worthless Soviet currency" in these parts. Nobody wanted *gelt,* how strange. British, French, Dutch or German currency were even worse, they could not even buy the minimum food staples. There was only one real currency here, the dollar, known by a multitude of names in Yiddish, including *grine* (green ones), *emese* (real ones), and most of all *valyúte* (foreign currency, technically applicable to any convertible foreign currency).

We started at six the next morning on an icy December day. The first stop heading northeast was Podbrodz (now Pabradė) where Meishke told me there was an old Jewish barber who knows everything in the area. This town, still comprising mostly wooden houses, was a little reminiscent of my romantic idea of a shtetl. But only a little. Where the shtetl came alive to me was not in the surroundings, but in the barber. A small bald man with a 1930s black moustache, Ziske Shapiro was shaving a man who had no

hands or feet. He soon finished and I asked if these were war injuries. Ziske laughed, and in deep, but quite standard Lithuanian Yiddish, said: "What war injuries! Sometimes a peasant here gets very drunk, falls asleep in the ice and snow, and freezes off his extremities. Say, what brings you here?"

I told him, and asked if he would accompany us. Ziske pondered a minute, and then said to himself, looking in the mirror: "M'et forn!" (We'll go). He refused to take payment from the invalid who had a coin in his pocket ready to pay, and apologized (in Russian) to the other four or five people waiting for a haircut.

Ziske locked up his shop, got in the car, and we were off down a forest road, not unlike those around my parents' forest house in Spring Glen, New York. But this was Lithuania and we were on the road to Michaleshik. There was a little sign that said "Belarus," more or less in the spirit of the signs between New York and New Jersey. My grasp of the Russian alphabet was still shaky, but when we got there, I surely enough could read the sign that said "Michalishki."

This was Michaleshik, and here was the Vilia (vih-LEE-eh) River of Menke's books. It took Ziske a moment or two to find the oldest people in town who would best remember pre-war Jewish life. Neither Ziske nor I realized that he was embarking on a new non-barberly job that would last most of the following decade.

One of the people Ziske found, Ravdanovitsh, a tall mustached man in his mid nineties, had actually worked in high books during the spring thaw, for Menke's grandfather Aaron-Velvel Gubersky. He had a perfect memory of the murder of our cousin Yankele in January of 1918. It was the first of twelve interviews of twilight-year eyewitnesses I was to record.

All of Menke's stories were more or less corroborated though nobody had the slightest memory of the boy himself who had left for America seventy years earlier.

But something much more than the origins of my father's Brooklyn candy-store stories was coming into focus, something somehow "academic" on a trip that was to be strictly "personal"

(in a field like Yiddish, one has to always at least try to keep the two separate, and I had perhaps carried that separation of "church and state" to an extreme within myself). It dawned upon me, standing in the middle of a bitterly cold wonderland-snow Michaleshik, that I too had subconsciously thought of the shtetl as a romantic construct of a recently annihilated civilization, but here I was standing in the middle of one, not any old shtetl, but *ours*. That these streets and houses were for centuries populated by a Yiddish speaking population immersed in the books of old (and latterly, of new) was not in dispute. A highly literate text-centered society dwelling in little wooden houses, each with a huge stove and surrounded by a huge orchard, surrounded by forests and rivers and natural beauty on all sides, in an underpopulated part of the world.

I began to put together what I was seeing not so much with what I had read (and taught) in Yiddish literature, but in the proud descriptions of hundreds of shtetl natives I had met in New York, London and Israel. Each shtetl was a proud self-contained mini-civilization whose main feature was the juxtaposition of this incredibly literate and ordered society, and (very far from assimilated Jews' ideas of "the ghetto"), glorious nature all around: fields, forests, rivers and rivulets. For the first time, the Holocaust became something near and not something abstract: the residents of each and every one of these houses was locked in a big pen (the Nazi ghetto) carved out of a section of the village in 1941, and taken to Ponar, the mass murder site outside Vilna, in 1942, and murdered only because he or she was Jewish. Many of the older residents remember it all.

We became friendly with a few local characters in town, above all one Antony Voitsikhovitsh, who showed us around, and took us to the old Jewish cemetery. The surviving stones seemed to lurch in every direction, and in some hard-to-read stones, the snow had conveniently settled in the etched Jewish letters, making them eminently readable. The remains of the cemetery were all that was left, beside the memories of the elderly local Christians, mostly Poles, about each house, and of course, the houses themselves, their thatched roofs often still surviving underneath the Soviet corrugated metal roofing.

One non-native resident, who remained a close friend for the remainder of his life, and whose home became a standard stopover in the years ahead, was a retired schoolteacher and principal, local historian and contributor to the regional Belarusian language newspaper. Michail Andreevich Kletsovsky was born in a village near Gomel, in eastern Belorussia in the 1920s, A decorated war veteran, he settled in Michaleshik to teach after the war. He was fascinated to learn that Michaleshik had been the focus of so much of the work of a poet in New York, and went on, in the years to come, to set up a "Menke Katz corner" in the local library, and to arrange for the translation of some poems into the Belarusian language.

From Michaleshik we went on to Svir. The car broke down at a turn off where I saw something so incongruous, I thought it might have been planted: an American STOP sign like the one on 55th street in Brooklyn. Meishke was hailing down drivers to stop and get us going, and soon succeeded.

In Svir, there was little specific to ask about except the famed Svir Hill of all those Yiddish curses. The whole region, with its forests, rivers and lakes, and farmlands stretching into the horizon, is very flat, and I couldn't imagine a mountain. We quickly learned that Svir Hill, the famed *Svirer barg* of Yiddish folklore, is an artificial hill with a large flat top constructed by Napoleon's forces for military purposes. The oldest people in town remembered their grandparents telling them about the townspeople being made to bring a bucket of earth at a time to build the hill. An old peasant took us to what was left of the old Jewish cemetery. It was a sight of mystic beauty: old gravestones facing every angle, almost with forceful facial expressions, on a pine-forested hill overlooking magnificent Lake Svir. Looking across to the east, it's opposite shore is visible, but going southward, it seems to be a great ocean with no end in sight.

At nightfall we drove to Svintsyan, and stayed in the Soviet government-owned hotel there. A *lux* or "luxury suite," comprising two rooms and two bathrooms, cost way under a dollar, so I quickly ordered three suites, for Meishke the driver on the ground floor, for Ziske the barber on the first floor, and one

for myself on the top floor, so that I could survey Menke's birthtown from up on high next morning. Meishke and Ziske both knew the few remaining Jews in Svintsyan, and both mentioned Blumka Katz (no relation) as the woman who knows everything.

Blumka gave us a royal welcome the next morning. She was born in 1913. I was flabbergasted to learn that she had studied in Vilna with the great Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich (1894—1969), who founded the YIVO there in 1925 (YIVO being an acronym for *Yidisher vísnshaftlekher institút* — Yiddish Scientific Institute, now the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York). That was the Max Weinreich I had "debated" with so much in my linguistic papers of the 1980s (and Blumka was equally flabbergasted to learn that). She spoke all day about Vilna of the twenties and thirties, and gave glimpses into her biography. In the 1930s, she and her first husband had crossed the border from then-Poland to the Soviet Union (after hearing radio broadcasts about the socialist paradise for all peoples). Her husband was shot and she was sentenced to a decade of hard labor in Kolyma, a frozen region in the Siberian lowlands, east of the river Lena, not too far from Alaska. But in the crazy history of the twentieth century, Stalin's paranoid "justice system" thereby saved her from a certain death in the Holocaust. "Svintsyan" (chapter 17 in this book), provides more detail of Blumka's life.

As we were parting that night, I knew we would remain friends (she knew, too), and before leaving, she called me aside to ask a "big favor." She never knew her father, he emigrated to America when her mother was pregnant with her. She heard rumors before the war that he had settled in America in a city called *Sirakooz* (Syracuse, upstate New York), had remarried, and, in the late 1930s, had a son who would be her half-brother. Maybe I could find her half brother. He would be the son of Abbe-Zelig Katz of Syracuse. I promised to do my best, thinking to myself that with a name like "Katz" (a Jewish equivalent of Jones or Smith), that it would be hopeless.

Back in Vilna, I busied myself with professional contacts at Vilnius University, and particularly with the new professor of Jewish history, Meir Shub, not knowing that close to a decade later

I would myself move here and join him at the university. I also became good friends with a remarkable woman, Dr. Irena Veisaitė, who had been born in the capital of interwar independent Lithuania, Kaunas (Kovna) in 1928. Irena's mother and most of her relatives were brutally murdered in the first days of the Holocaust by local Lithuanian fascists, but it was an immensely brave Lithuanian woman who took Irena in and hid her. Long a lecturer in European literature and a famous drama critic, Irena was busy setting up the new Soros foundation in Vilnius. During the very tense days of Soviet-Lithuanian confrontation her humanity and hatred of all prejudice, whether against Jews or Lithuanians, made her a singular light in Vilnius. Her apartment was a free salon where people of all backgrounds came, ate, drank and argued amicably. Though a Lithuanian patriot through and through, she trenched through a huge pile of snow to thank the young Soviet soldiers cleaning it up (while young nationalists were yelling abuse at them).

But during these big city Vilnius days I was planning a return to Svintsyan, where the hotel with its crumbling "luxury suite" would serve as a good base for forays to other *shtetlakh* (SHTET-lach, the Yiddish plural of shtetl) in the area.

Ziske became my scout, translator, partner in all future journeys, for as many years as his health permitted. Having bidden farewell to Mr. Grazhul (and his appetite for "green" currency) we settled in the hotel in Svintsyan (called the "Eglė," the Lithuanian word for fir tree), to travel to towns and villages in the region. I was becoming more and more taken with the idea that I must somehow find an elderly Jew who grew up in Michaleshik, video him or her showing every nook, and bring the video back to Menke upstate New York. We drove from village to village. In the nearby Lintoop (now Lintupy, Belarus), we were directed to a Jewish fellow in his fifties. He greeted us warmly and insisted we drink a *l'chaim* (traditional Jewish toast) with him and gave me a glass full of a clear liquid which I took to be vodka. The man's name was Zuske Ostanovsky. The liquid was not vodka. It was pure 96 proof spirit made in the local spirit factory where his wife, Yeva, was chemical director. I experienced momentary blindness, and thought I would faint. "Ach, an Amerikáner!" Zuske said, and

quickly gave me a glass of freezing water from his well; after this second drink, the first had belatedly become enjoyable, if that is possible. (The final chapter of this book, "Lintoop" tells more about the Ostanovskys of Lintoop.)

I told him I was looking for an old Jew born in Michaleshik. "You're too late by three days," he barked, in a heavily Russian-accented (but colorful and homey) Yiddish. "My wife's uncle is from Michaleshik, he moved here to Lintoop after the war, but he's already in Minsk on the way to Israel. His flight leaves tomorrow!"

"Then it's *not* too late," I told him, gathering courage to argue with the guy. "Call him up right now, and I'll pay you right away for the call." Avremke Rein in Minsk, in his late eighties, told me over the phone that it would cost a fortune to change his plans. I told him to find out the extent of the fortune. It ended up being about twelve dollars.

By now it was December 24th. We were staying across the border in Svintsyan (that week the Lithuanians and Belorussians had both put up border posts, but visas were not yet necessary). We had to find a driver who would take Ziske the barber and myself to Minsk to pick up Avremke Rein, take us all to Michaleshik, have it filmed, take Mr. Rein back to Minsk, and then take us back to the hotel in Svintsyan.

Blumka got on the phone to all her friends who had other friends with cars (none of *her* friends had a car). For hours we were getting nowhere. Money wasn't working as an incentive to drive to Minsk on Christmas Day in what was becoming a major blizzard. "Blizzard-Shmizzard" I kept saying, and Blumka's husband, Kalmen, kept thinking of new people to call. Finally Blumka remembered a young woman she had once trained as a nurse, whose husband, Pioter, had a car. Pioter was an Old Believer, a member of the old-style Russian Orthodox sect that fled to Lithuania centuries earlier seeking religious freedom. Like other Russian Orthodox people, their Christmas doesn't come until a few weeks later, in January. It is part of their religion to follow the old-style (Julian) calendar. In other words, there was a fellow for

whom December 25th was not a holiday, who'd be willing to do the whole trip for a hundred rubles (by then quite worthless).

Christmas morning, a handsome young gladiator with a classic nineteenth century trimmed black beard (my image of a young Russian revolutionary of days gone by) turned up at 5 AM as agreed, at the hotel in Svintsyan. He took Ziske and me to Minsk in the blizzard, always driving his snow covered tiny red Zhiguli into every skid. The man was an engineer by training, and he viewed each skid with a certain calculating look before going for it. I couldn't speak a word to him then, but, as with Blumka, we somehow both new that a lifelong friendship had been found.

When we arrived in Minsk at midday, the snowstorm stopped, the sun came out and started melting everything into mud, and Avremke Rein came down from the Soviet apartment building where he was staying, and got in the car with us for the long ride back west to his native Michaleshik.

On the way, I quizzed him about all of Menke's stories, and he knew every one. The only discrepancy was in the name of the girl over whom our cousin Yankele (son of Chaim the Smith) had been murdered by Itske (son of Chonke the doctor). He insisted it was Etka, the daughter of Lozer. In Menke's version, it was Leya, daughter of a new teacher who had come from Vilna to teach in the village cheider (traditional Jewish elementary school).

And, Avremke added many stories I had never heard. "You must know from your father," he said, "that Chaim the son of Mala-Esther, not to be confused with your uncle Chaim the Smith, poisoned himself with acid because the girl he loved, *Yentke Sime-Meyse's* (= Yentka, the daughter of Sima who was herself the daughter of Meishe), went off and married Motke, son of Menashe the ferryman, that's the same Motke who made the bastard born to Amma the Madwoman..." As he was talking, I remembered Menke's poem "Amy the Sorceress" in his *Burning Village*.

In Michaleshik, Blumka's grandson was waiting with his "friend with the video camera," and Avremke gave us a tour around town. We didn't have long to stay there. Avremke was not far from ninety and we promised to get him back to Minsk that night.

We got to Minsk around midnight, took [illegible]
started on our way back to Lithuania, arriving at our rundown "luxury suites" in Svintsyan at 5 AM, precisely twenty four-hours after departing. I gave Pioter one hundred dollars, not the promised worthless heap of rubles, thinking that what he had done for me and Menke was worth a million. The mild mannered, always cheerful Pioter who had just driven through blizzard and mudpools for a day and a night got furious. "They murdered all the Jews in town, and there was one Jew born there who still lives somewhere in our country, and you wanted to film him to take back the film to your father in America, and you think I will take money for helping you do this! What kind of person do you think I am?"

Pioter the driver ("komandír," we christened him), Ziske ("official translator" in the jargon of our newly formed expeditionary party), and Dovid (the "Amerikáner fun Oksferd") were bonding into a threesome that would gather about twice a year for expeditions and adventures over the next decade. Some of them are recorded in this book. Depending on how things were going on any given expedition, we would refer to ourselves as "di dray muskatirn" (The Three Musketeers), "di dray avanturistn" (The Three Adventurists), or, when things took weird turns, "di dray meshugóyim" (The Three Lunatics).

The humor and self-satire proved necessary as our decade of expeditions would take us to the last of the last survivors of the Holocaust who had remained in the land of their forefathers, and bringing *them* a bit of joy and humor became every bit as important as taping their memories, their dialect and the responses into what evolved into a dialectological and ethnographic questionnaire.

Toward the end of my month in the Old Country, in January 1991, Ziske, Pioter and I made one more trip back to Michaleshik, taking the video-boys from Vilnius along. Blumka joined us, and suggested we go to the city hall. I got a little scared. Why look for trouble with the Soviet government? Blumka smiled and told us to trust her. She entered first, and asked to see the mayor. A handsome young Belorussian, Michail Krupitsa, came out, and Blumka explained to him in Russian (with Ziske translating the

important bits for me) that this fellow from Oxford University has come to Michaleshik to visit the village whence his father's family hailed, and, that the chap's father is a famous Yiddish poet in New York who has written many books about Michaleshik.

Several years earlier, I had had the privilege of meeting the Queen of England at a banquet of the Council of Christians and Jews at Westminster Palace in London. But I cannot tell a lie. Exciting as it was, it didn't come close to meeting the mayor of Michaleshik. I know the mayor of Michaleshik! The mayor locked up city hall, much as Ziske had locked up his barber shop a few weeks earlier, and he ordered us a banquet. Under a portrait of Lenin, Krupitsa made a toast to the Yiddish poet Menke Katz of New York.

The designated departure date came. It was mid January of 1991, Soviet tanks were everywhere, and Russian-Lithuanian tensions were growing. I had learned from many of the elderly local Jews that their sympathies were with the Russians. From the day that war broke out, they had only ever known German and Lithuanian fascism and Russian communism. For them western democracy and prosperity were a thing they would never see in their part of the world. The Lithuanians collaborated with the Nazis, by and large, while the Soviets saved whoever survived, and drove out the Nazis. At the same time, I was making friends with more and more young Lithuanian intellectuals (and young pro-Lithuanian Jewish professionals and intellectuals). It was all a very different and complex world with its own sense of reality. For all my foreignness, I didn't feel foreign in Lithuania, I felt I was somehow returning home, and I felt embarrassed about feeling that way. An academic who writes treatises on proto-vowels is not supposed to be romantic or sentimental.

But something else was bothering me then. The second Oxford trimester, Hilary term, was about to begin, but I just *had* to see Menke first, to bring him the bottle of vodka that Krupitsa had signed "from the mayor of Michaleshik Michail Krupitsa to the poet of Michaleshik Menke Katz." I am a clumsy fellow, and the bottle might break if I delayed. What would I do then? Not to mention the video, the photographs, the stories. For the first time

ever, I would make my Oxford students wait a week, higher powers would forgive me. My students would heave a sigh of relief.

There was again a stopover in Moscow of some hours. I found my way to a British Airways office and told the stunned attendant that I wanted to throw away my ticket for the rest of my journey to London, I wanted to fly to New York, and a week later return to England. All was quickly fixed in this first corner of westernness since I had arrived in the east.

My parents, Menke and Rivka were waiting at Newark Airport, but this welcome was different. For Menke, "finding Michaleshik" was a sort of miracle. That night, his mother Badonna came to him in his dreams and told him to stop writing English and return to Yiddish. And so it was, that for his remaining time, he wrote only in Yiddish.

My long postponed sabbatical year started at the end of March 1991, and I was to have spent it with my parents in Spring Glen. Each night of the first month, Menke and I stayed up late together in a back room that faced the forest with many little panes, he writing poems and I working on linguistic papers and an anthology of academic papers. He had seen the video many times and it seemed we had a whole year to become immersed in so much.

The night of April 23rd was like the others, but when we took a break and went for a ride through the forest, he spoke only of Ziske, and Blumka, and the other elderly Jews who remained behind in Lithuania. For Menke and me alike, it was a huge revelation that there were elderly Jews in the land of our origins. Menke said "Heershe-Dovid," calling me by my Yiddish name, "Don't ever let's forget these last Jews who stayed there, ok?"

The next day, he took a nap and died in his sleep, twelve days after his 85th birthday, never having been sick since boyhood. Every day was poetry and the joy of poetry. I have never shaved off the beard I grew for the traditional one-month period of mourning (in some traditions, three months). But for me it cannot end here in this life, and I'm reminded of the poem that hung for many years in the Eagle and Child Pub in Oxford, next door to the

offices I worked in for many years. The poem is written in *Menke* form, in which each line increases by a syllable:

My son,
I swear by
My two hundred
And forty eight bones,
By my life and death, we
Shall meet yonder and yonder
Not as ghost to ghost in spooky
Heavens but clicking wine glasses at
"Eagle and Child" pub, cheering: Ho-Ho-Ho!
L'chaim!"

SVIR TO SMARGON

My father's name, Menke, as a given name, was a one-in-the-world by the time I came along (though Menkes, Menken and other forms turn up as surnames). He assured people though, that it was a known, if very local name in the villages around Vilna when he was a boy and just went out of style after the First World War. After all, names come in and out of fashion.

The Yiddish of Vilna Province, and Lithuanian Yiddish in general, much prefer the loving diminutive *–ke* to the *–l* forms that predominate in other forms of Yiddish. Thus the intimate equivalents of classical Esther and Abraham might be *Esterl* and *Avreyml* down south in Poland and Ukraine, but in Lithuania they would most likely appear as *Esterke* and *Avremke*.

One of the few ways someone could upset Menke was to allege that his name is a Lithuanian Yiddish version of the usual *Mendel*. Well, it fact in some cases it might well have been, but in his there was a different and known origin.

Ashkenazic Jews (those of central and Eastern European vintage) name for the dead in their family, and within that tradition there is a certain preference for a name to be given to a newborn as soon as possible after its previous carrier dies. There are various legends about the name and the soul being intertwined and the disrespect, not to mention the kabbalistic dangers that may accrue, when the departed soul has to wait too long for its name to reappear in a newborn.

Menke's father Heershe-Dovid (for whom I am named) lost his mother, Mona (MOI-neh) in 1900. But he and Badonna kept having boys. After Eltshik and Berke came a third boy, and Heershe-Dovid would wait no longer, so the third son, born unto him during the second Passover feast (*seyder*) of 1906 was called Menke, a name after Mona, as a boy could not be called Mona. Although Menke could not have known the grandmother he was named for, he heard many stories of her goodheartedness. She

became an unpaid chicken doctor in Svir, and was the only one in town who could heal a chick ailment called *pipetz* (whatever that means).

To fast-forward to 1930s New York: Menke had published his two-volume *Brenendik shtetl* (Burning Village), an epic poem about Michaleshik and Svintsyan during World War I. The politically correct socialist literary criticism of the day ripped it to shreds on the pages of the New York *Frayhayt* (or *Freiheit*, meaning "Freedom") the foremost left-wing paper.

The editor, M. Olgin, asked in his review of the book, "Why is there less than a page about the October Revolution? That is much less than the space accorded the mad cow! Twenty times less than the space for Heershe-Leib Tarshish, the assistant beadle of the Chassidic studyhouse!"

The attacks kept coming. Unlike its Yiddish counterparts in the Soviet Union, the *Frayhayt* under Olgin, a towering figure of the left in New York Yiddish literature, allowed free debate. Menke eventually replied, in August 1938, with four poems and a manifesto, collectively named *The Brave Coward.* It is a protest against the use of poetry for political ends. The manifesto ridicules the communist writers" penchant for appending "red tails" (ideologically acceptable endings) to otherwise fine poems. It also rejects the insistence of the leftist critics of the day that poetry bring happiness to the worker. "Insincerity can only beget a flat and boring kind of happiness, while darkness sparkles through in a true poem. Happiness hoisted upon oneself artificially is — madness."

This brought a new storm. One critic called the manifesto "a poison gas attack not only against the proletarian writers but against all proletarian literature." Another, writing the following week, went to the heart of the matter. "Who does he mean, now? Most of our poets are activists, revolutionaries, communists! If they are lying in their poetry, they are also liars in their struggle. This is calumny of the worst sort!"

But it was left to another *Frayhayt* poet to go for Menke's grandmother. His summation of *Burning Village:* "You can find the whole shebang there strung out on the damp walls: from the

purest poetic sadness to the most far-out spider, from Grandmother Toltza's shrouds to the wailing of hungry cats. . ."

The Yiddish term *di bobbe Toltse* (Grandma Toltza) corresponds to "Aunt Tilly," a derogatory description of an old woman.

"This was already too much," Menke told me at our table at Bernie's. "Imagine, they made fun of a poet writing poems to the grandmother he never knew. That's how the communists understood poetry!"

"Did you answer back?" I asked.

"Answer them?! What for, if they are so superficial, and think that poetry should serve politics, they're not worth answering. I was working on the third volume of *Burning Village,* when my grandmother, *di bobbe Moines*, whom I never knew — I was, you know, named after her — started coming to me in my dreams every night, and dictating my next book of poems. *She* answered them!"

A kabbalist, he believed in spiritual links between the dead and those named after them. But there was much more to it here. This was an interlocking tale of the shtetl, the New York metropolis, modernist Yiddish literature on its Lower East Side, and the debate about poetry in service to movements out to make a better world.

The result was Menke's fifth book of verse, *S'hot dos vort mayn Bobe Moyne* (Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor). In the book, which appeared in 1939, Mona rises from her grave in the village of Svir, to give the Jewish communists at New York a right licking.

Early on in the book, her spirit lashes out at the fancy, politically correct Critic of New York.

In his noble top hat, in his snappy tuxedo,
He is slaughterer at the modern-day slaughterhouse.
For so many generations, he tears at my shrouds,
And with the tatters of the holy cloth
Like blindness, he hides the sun from my people.
He brings the glimmering light of guillotines —

O Haman's light!
And the axe shines
Over my martyr-grandchildren,
And the axe shines
Over the last limbs of your dead Grandma Mona.

Nearing the end of her vision, Grandma Mona bids farewell to her grandson Menke, warning him not to be tricked into rubbishing the heritage of the shtetl.

Have a good day, my nearby grandchild — my distant joy:
In your little room,
I see the cramped life of my grand-grandfathers,
I see the electric God of New York, ashamed,
With the same demon, hovering over a mourning-candle —
I see my strong race flickering, in the same glimmer
That plays smoke serpents on the ceiling.
At your ruined walls, I recognized
The same hardship songs of the wind.

Have a good day, my nearby grandchild — my distant joy:
You're named after me and my proud noble pedigree —
The pedigree of millers, woodcutters, and Vilia raftsmen,
A pedigree of grandfathers — heroes,
Who rode horses like lightning to their chosen one —
A pedigree — to be hailed along with Samson.

(These translations are by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav of Yale University; it is part of their translation of the Yiddish works of Menke Katz to appear in *Menke*, published by The Smith of New York.)

There have been no Jews in Svir since the Holocaust. Most of the old Jewish cemetery that lay for centuries on a pine-wooded hill overlooking majestic Lake Svir, had been dug up some years earlier by the Soviet town council for ballast for the new road heading south toward Smargon. From one angle, the stark earth forms a vertical wall, marking the point where the section of hill was removed for ballast. But what does remain, as I had seen in my first brief visit back in December 1991, had the sanctity of an

old mystic graveyard in a pine forest upon a hill, its stones, in Hebrew and Aramaic with the odd Yiddish name, telling tales of a people who once inhabited these parts.

The remaining gravestones (some of them centuries old) have increasingly been vandalized. The cemetery is on land now forming part of the local lakeside fishery. One stone is used for barbecues. Another provides a hard surface for outdoor carpentry.

In an autumn 1991 visit, my second to the region, we (the "we" here referring throughout to Pioter, Ziske and Dovid) went to see the governor of the county, in a town called Miadel, and indeed several other county governors to talk about the ongoing destruction of the cemeteries.

During those visits to several county governors, we were accompanied by the dauntless teacher from Michaleshik, Michail Kletsovsky, who in known in the region from his frequent contributions to the arts pages of local Belorussian newspapers. We would invariably turn up at Michail's place, a large wooden house that backed on to the Vilia River, and ask if he had made all the appointments for the day. "Of course not," he would quip. "If we let them know we're coming, they will all run away. If we come without an appointment, we have some hope of catching somebody!"

Some county governors make it clear that without a donation of ten thousand dollars "from the relatives of the buried people, those now in America" the destruction cannot be halted. Our pleas to the effect that nobody is asking for restoration, just a moratorium on destruction, fall on deaf ears. In the case of Miadel, which includes Svir, the governor is rather more cultured and expressed his deep sympathy. He explains that he is, however, powerless to act, because the cemetery actually "belongs to" the fishery, and we must "negotiate" with the head of the fishery.

Back to Svir. The director is friendly enough but won't budge. In other towns, officials have offered to preserve what is left of the Jewish cemetery in return for "hard currency from America" (back to the green ones). But this fellow is an old-time ideological communist. "I am not an anti-Semite! But when you're

dead you're dead. This business about holy stones is opium for the people! Opium, I tell you!"

We ask if we can go through the cemetery to look for the gravestone of a poet's grandmother. The word "poet" does elicit a lot of respect in these parts. "A poet? He lived in America, and his grandmother came from here, from Svir? Sure, go ahead."

It was time now for Pioter to head back to his work as an engineer back home in Ignalina, Ziske to Podbrodz to man his barbershop, and Dovid to Britain, but we made plans to reassemble our threesome for a month in the coming May, (1992), to methodically transcribe every stone in the cemetery, and who knows, by some miracle we might find family gravestones, or even Grandmother Mona's.

And so it came to pass, at the beginning of May, we set out from the Svintsyan base and evenings with Blumka, to Svir and laid camp for a month. Pioter, who had by then mastered the Jewish alphabet, brought all the necessary gear: chalk, to fill in the lettering on obscured stones, to better be able to read their inscriptions; shovels, to dig out mostly buried stones; rope, to use his car to hoist over heavy stones that had fallen face down; and, paint, to number each stone on its back, so as to map out the site methodically, and avoid doing one stone twice (easily done in ruins of cemeteries where once straight rows have become a maze of leaning towers lurching in all directions.

For all its failures, "Seek and ye shall find" every now and again does pan out. At the end of the first day's work, at stone number 100, we were flabbergasted to come face to face with — Grandma Mona's headstone. Its inscription translates: "Here lies a dear woman, Moyne the daughter of Tzvi. Died on the 29th day of Nisn 5660 [= 28 April 1900]. May her soul be bound to the lands of the living."

The director of the fishery promises that nothing will happen to the surviving stones. For now, the communists have stopped tearing at Grandma Mona's shrouds. She, who died in 1900, and in 1938 came to her grandson's dreams in a poor tenement on the Lower East Side of New York City, would be left in peace.

Selfish as it may sound, I could not bear the thought of spending a whole month transcribing the cemetery when we had found our Grandmother Moyne the first day. Pioter cheerfully agreed to return later and take care of it (and he did, and to this day, people from many countries, especially those called Svirsky, write to ask if their relatives are on the list). One of the people whose grave Pioter found was my great great grandfather Elle-Leizer (Elijah Eliezer) Katz. I am after all Heershe-Dovid son of Menke son of Heershe-Dovid son of Yisroel-Yeisef son of Ella-Lazier Katz. This Elle-Leizer, was the chap for whom Menke's short-lived brother Eltshik was named, and he even makes a cameo appearance in Menke's *Burning Village* of 1938.

What to do with the rest of May? I said to Pioter at sundown: "Why don't we head south to Smargon? It looks not far on the map, and many Yiddish poets were born there, including Meishe Kulbak and Avrom Sutzkever." We head south and stay the night in the Soviet hotel there. The rooms are among the best in smaller Belorussian towns, but they are on the sixth floor. The elevator hasn't worked for years, but it's all good exercise.

Next morning, we start asking in town about the old Jewish cemetery. Some oldtimers tell us there is nothing left, the site has been turned into a kindergarten. So, the hapless musketeers turn up at the kindergarten, whose name translates "Kindergarten Number 7: Little Sun." The middle aged very Soviet looking, and sympathetic principal comes to speak to us outside, apologizing for not inviting us in, because it might scare the children who are scared enough being stuck in this "haunted" place. Why "haunted," I dare ask through my redoubtable translator Ziske Shapiro.

"Most of the walls of the building are made from the stones of the old Jewish cemetery that was here. And, to tell you the truth, a strange thing keeps happening. No matter how many times they replaster the inside walls and paint it all over, the plaster keeps

chipping, and little Jewish letters become visible. The children here have had nightmares and many psychological problems because of these gravestones that keep revealing themselves, and parents do everything they can to send their children to another kindergarten, and basically, it's the ones with the least connections to the bureaucrats who end up having no choice. I can't tell you any more. Please don't take any pictures, we have enough trouble as it is! We work every day on top of bones, of buried people, what more do we need to suffer? Good luck to you!"

As if by divine plan, the three of us turn our thoughts away from cemeteries and start asking in the center of town if there are any Jews living in Smargon. We are sent to a middle aged fellow, a teacher, who is half Jewish by birth, and seems to be neither ashamed nor proud of the fact. His main interest is to show that the people of Smargon are good, welcoming people. He walks us up to his flat, which like most of the others in Soviet-era buildings, is spruced up by having rugs of all descriptions hung on the walls instead of laid out on the floors. Like most people in Belarus, he is happy to welcome us in to his home with no hesitation, and asks if we want refreshments or a drink. By now, the eastern custom of taking one's shoes off when entering a home, no matter how "un-immaculate" the house may be, has become natural. It has also sunk in that one doesn't shake hands across a threshold in this part of the world.

The teacher was on the phone for what seemed a very long time, calling this one and that one. Finally he gave us a name and address with a wink to me that seemed to say: "You're in luck today, my friend, I think we've found what you are looking for," though I didn't know myself what I was looking for. . .

It was Elena Iosifovna Sokobinzon we were looking for, at Kirava 16. Belarus has kept all its Soviet era names. Virtually every town has its Lenin Square with the big statue of the man himself, and streets called Sovietskaya (for the union) Gagarina (for the cosmonaut), and so forth. One of the most common is Kirava, named for a gentleman not particularly known to westerners, Leningrad party secretary Sergei Kirov, whose assassination in 1934 heralded a wave of terror and purges by Stalin's regime.

I cannot think of many times in my life when my mental image of a place has been so far off the mark. I imagined another built-in slum block of Soviet flats (and wasn't then experienced enough to realize that an address with a street number only, and no "entrance" or "apartment" number signals a detached home on its own). I also imagined another Soviet type with some kind of Jewish background.

When we found the address, I felt another flush of euphoria. It was a long wooden hut right out of Chagall. Each window, with the simple small shtetl design over its three panes (one transom over two tall panes, the connecting glazing bars forming a "T") was inclined at a different angle. The spaces between the logs were filled with a mud-like mixture but there were still plenty of gaps. There was a small orchard in the garden, which was being watched over by a goat, tied to a stake with a rope generous enough for it to come running toward us, a sort of watch-goat. The roof was of wooden shingles with colored tin patches. The front door was wide open and chiclets were freely running in and out of the house. They live in the *katúkh,* a special compartment at the base of the huge shtetl stove that warms the entire house.

The flush of romanticism at "having found the full-monty shtetl house" was instantaneously transferred from the house to its inhabitant. We learn that Elena Iosifovna Sokobinzon is by birth Elka Tsirulnik. Elka (Yiddish EL-keh) is dressed in many layers of peasant rags artfully placed one over the other. Her deeply lined face peers out from under the makeshift shawl on her head.

I asked if she spoke Yiddish. She shouted out with amazement: "Yiddish!" She hadn't spoken her native language for many decades, and was thrilled, but also shocked, that Yiddish speaking people had come to find her. She survived the war as a partisan in the forests and showed us her special dress to which all the medals were pinned. Like the others we were to meet in the years ahead, she was not familiar with the concept "compensation" and was in fact shocked to learn that survivors in the west were receiving *kompensatsye.*

It was also at this instant that the two strands of my own life, my father's world of poetic Yiddish, and mine of technical

dialectology, came together. It took a minute to realize that her Yiddish was a treasure from a lost world. This was not the standard Yiddish of New York, nor the literary Yiddish of the Yiddish schools of pre-war Eastern Europe. Nor was it the watered down dialect Yiddish still widely heard in the west. This was the real McCoy, unadulterated, shtetl Yiddish of someone who never went near a modern Yiddish school, and who was speaking the language of her foremothers and forefathers. What in heaven's name were we Yiddish philologists, linguists and dialectologists doing in the west!? For decades our mantra had been that we have to make do with emigré informants. It was no longer true, but we had fallen into an intellectual inertia and the convenience of claiming that the data gathering period for this branch of linguistic science was over. It is not.

As she was boiling water to serve us chicory in a cast-iron pot in one of the openings of the huge stove in the middle of the house, my thoughts flashed back to my student days as an undergraduate studying linguistics back in New York at Columbia University. We had read about French and German dialectologists climbing mountains to find the last speaker of this or that dialect, and of course, of linguists braving Asia, Africa, and faraway islands to record vanishing languages and dialects. I would feel a certain bitter envy, being a student of Yiddish. After the Holocaust, I thought, we were limited to the likes of New York, Tel Aviv, London or Montreal apartment houses. And even after my first trips to Lithuania and Belarus, the elderly Jews I had come in touch with, Bluma Katz of Svintsyan, our translator Ziske Shapiro of Podbrodz and others had all studied in modern Yiddish schools before the war and spoke a version of Standard Yiddish.

Elka Tsirulnik spoke a deep Lithuanian shtetl Yiddish that western students of Yiddish would have a long time tuning in to, simply because the real McCoy cannot exist in the west, where for many decades the emigrés have been anglicized or hebraicized or hispanicized or otherwise impacted by the postwar general environment. More than that, their Yiddish has been profoundly affected by all the other kinds of Yiddish of other immigrants from every corner of Eastern Europe. Local words for such everyday concepts as "ear," "to like" and "floor" quickly

disappeared as embarrassments in the face of the standard words. This lady even preserved traces of a verb tense that was thought to have disappeared over a century ago.

When we offered her some money, she told us:

"Keep it, there is nothing to buy here! What am I going to do with money? There is something I need though. A wintercoat. If you can send me a warm coat for the winter, it will change my life. If it's a luxury coat, with pockets, well, that would be magnificent."

When the journey was written up in the Yiddish *Forward* in New York, three separate readers in America, all born in Smargon wrote care of the editor asking for her address. They sent wintercoats with pockets to Smargon. Such is the force of the relationship known in Yiddish as *landslayt* (people coming from the same town back in the Old Country).

We soon realized that it was wrong to turn our informants into beggars. While it is generally accepted in the social sciences that informants are not paid, it was obvious that an exception had to be made in this project, and that a standard fee (which we eventually set at a minimum of fifty American dollars) always be paid for every full interview recorded. In Belarus, that often amounts to about two months pension. Still, it is a one-time gesture that has nothing to do with the failure of western Jewry to enable the last survivors who continue to live "at the scene of the crime" to live out their last days in dignity and without constant worry about juggling the needs for food and medicine.

That day in May 1992 changed the direction of the next decade, at least, of my own life. I realized that the last shtetl Jews are still out there; that they are very poor and very lonely, completely forgotten by the outside world (including the well to do and well organized Jewry of the western countries); and, they can transmit treasures of language, folklore, folksong, oral history and more. If only, it seemed to me, western Yiddish students could be brought into contact with *them,* before it is too late, a lot more of bona fide Yiddish would be transmitted than from all of us Yiddish professors put together. It was not until the late 1990s,

that these ideas crystallized into plans for turning Vilnius into a new international center of Yiddish studies.

The rest of May '92 was spent driving from town to town. Each year we tried to mount one or two expeditions to Lithuania and Belarus, until 1999, when I settled in Vilnius to take up a chair at the university and — continue to look for and more of the last of the Litvaks still in their land.

The people you will meet in the coming chapters are among the many our jolly threesome — Pioter, Ziske and Dovid — came upon over the last decade.

RADASHKOVITZ

Rummaging about on the gently sloping, vast and lonely overgrown hill where old Jewish gravestones seem to be enjoying the endless panorama of fields on all sides, we are startled by a woman in early middle age who tells us that her name is Rayissa Botvinik, that she is Jewish and understands Yiddish, but speaks haltingly. She doesn't want to leave the town of her late parents, but she wants to marry a Jew, and hence never married. Her other problem is her thyroid gland. Like many in Belarus, Chernobyl fallout caused her a serious disorder and she can't decide whether to have the operation or not. Many of her friends live with the disease, and many who opted for the hospital never came home, so she hopes life will somehow go on. Rayissa describes the thyroid troubles of her generation as a kind of plague that people here just accept.

Rayissa invites us to tea in her small cottage which is crammed with trinkets and shiny Soviet decorations. The ubiquitous hanging rug is not on the wall but dangles a little precariously from the ceiling as a room-divider. On the other unseen side is the minute living space rented by a young Belorussian woman who is just out of college and has her first job as an assistant teacher in the local school.

Ziske explains to Rayissa in over-the-top Russian, that she is young and beautiful, that he would marry her tomorrow if she would take an old barber, that he will take her to Israel where his older brother lives, and give her a new life. She stares down the barber in his high seventies from Lithuania (by now in the mid 1990s another world, no longer the next republic in the Union). Her scant niceties barely disguise that she is unimpressed with the offer. I forcefully nudged Ziske to tell her exactly what we're about, assuring him that there would be plenty of time for him to socialize with her later in the day, and started to explain myself in downright lousy, but understandable, Russian.

Looking for old Jews? Raiyssa's face beamed. She was asked for something she can provide. There is one last man in town and

Rayissa knows him well. He is the only pre-war Jew left in the entire area, and he's called "Abram."

A few steps off the main road is another hill, and on the hill is a wooden house surrounded by gardens and orchards. It is set back far from the road. A little man with a beard and traditional visored cap comes out when he hears strangers approaching. He looks more like Sholem Aleichem's beloved milkman than even the late Zero Mostel. But then again, he should. He is not acting the part of the traditional East European shtetl Jew. He is one, although a Litvak and a tailor, rather than a Ukrainian Jew and a milkman.

It is high afternoon in Radashkovitz, west of Minsk, and Avrom-Yankev Berchifand, who has been working in his garden all day, tells us he must pray the afternoon prayer, *minkhe*. He dons his prayershawl, sits himself down facing Jerusalem, and in an exalted trance of joy, launches into the start of the afternoon prayer, in a deep Lithuanian Ashkenazic accent:

Ashrey yeyshvey veysekho. . .

The lines of tension on his face fade, the voice waxes sweet, and it is obvious that praying to his Maker is no tedious chore.

Avrom-Yankev's soul has been untouched by communism and its attitudes toward religion, a rarity among a population living within this society for half a century. But here, on the pre-1939 Polish side of the border, it has been only half century of communist rule; a little bit further east, on the pre-1939 Soviet side of the border, it was over seventy years of communism.

Throughout our work, this long-forgotten border, that held from the early 1920s to September 1939, is very much a living cultural border between very different kinds of Jews, whose youth was molded under the Poles to its west (offering religious freedom), and the Soviets to its east (offering Soviet society and ever decreasing religious establishments). Few people not from the area realize that Poland stretched very far east, stopping just short of Minsk for all those interwar years. Much of the heartland of Jewish Lithuania (and for that matter the medieval Lithuanian Grand Duchy) changed hands from czarist Russia to Poland at the

end of the First World War; to the Soviets in September 1939; to the Nazis from 1941 to 1944, and then again to the Soviets until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The internal republic boundaries became the new state boundaries. And, since Lithuania and the Baltics are joining the West, and Belarus stays more Soviet than Russia itself to the east, the Lithuanian-Belorussian border is a key part of today's new (and hardening) east-west border, but that is another story. We are at Radashkovitz, still on the interwar Polish side, by a whisker.

For Avrom-Yankev, the Soviet order imposed after the September 1939 was all something very new.

But what about all those years after the war? The late forties, fifties and so forth?

"Hah! For me it just didn't exist. What do I care if everyone else wanted to believe in that bucket of rubbish? And what rubbish it was!"

His spirit is undaunted by poverty. "I have my prayerbook so I am a rich man. Hitler and Stalin both tried to take it away from me and they both failed."

His strength, diminished by major surgery, and a host of ailments for which he cannot afford the medicine, returns when he prays. "I feel I am at one with God when I pray and no malady can cause me pain. But when I'm not praying, God, do I feel the pain."

He was born right here in Radashkovitz (now Radashkovitshy), in 1914. "This had always been a border town. When I was born, it was the last town in *Vilner gubernye* (Vilna province) just before the start of *Minsker gubernye* (Minsk province). Between the two world wars, it was the last town in eastern Poland, just before the start of the Belorussian republic of the Soviet Union. But since the communists took over, it's been in the middle of nowhere, no, I mean," he hastens to correct himself with a wry smile, "in the middle of Belarus, that's what I meant!"

Avrom-Yankev fled Radashkovitz three days after the Germans arrived in June of 1941. He was the only religious Jew among twenty-three Jews who decided to run for it and head east to deep Russia. The rest were "communists," not necessarily

ideologically, but they had been employed by the local Soviet institutions established when the Red Army overran what had been eastern Poland, "liberating" all of it on September 17th 1939 (taking "the part" allotted to the USSR by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact the previous month). Many western Belorussian towns have a "17th of September Street," not very much appreciated by the large number of ethnic Poles, well, Catholics who consider themselves Polish, but are considered Belorussians of the Catholic faith by many Belorussians. Nothing is simple here.

Why did only twenty-three people flee the Nazis in a town with around fifteen hundred Jews (about half the pre-war population)?

Avrom-Yankev gives us a valued lesson in historic truth.

First of all, nobody there remotely conceived of the possibility that the German army would harm innocent civilians. The older and wiser members of the community all remembered *yenem daytsh fun ershtn krig*. This line, translating "the previous Germans from the First World War" continues, for the Jews who remain in Eastern Europe, as a living collective Jewish memory that started with those who lived through World War I (their parents' generation, and some very old people still about). In these parts the German army was by far the most civil and civilized of all the armies who had been here. They were vastly kinder to the minorities than the Russian army or the original Polish legionnaires.

"It doesn't even occur to normal people that the whole population of Jews here would be shot or burned alive!"

What did the twenty-two communists flee, then? "Ah, says Avrom-Yankev," shaking his head up and down and clutching his well trimmed beard, "*they* knew that the Germans would deal harshly with communists, that is why most of the Jewish survivors who came back from Russia after the war were indeed from among the tiny number of Jews who were communists before the war. The vast majority of Jews, who had absolutely nothing to do with communism, and for whom the word *bolshevík* was an insult, stayed put and perished. What normal person could imagine that everyone would be killed? And, among the majority who stayed

put and knew at some point that they would all be killed, nearly all accepted it as God's will. It is a commandment to be prepared to sanctify God's name by perishing, if so required. There is nothing hard to understand here!"

Avrom-Yankev Berchifand, the God-fearing Jew of Radashkovitz, had just told us, in his very deep Lithuanian Yiddish, a number of historical truths that don't come easy to westerners.

Nearly all the Jews here had a few days, sometimes more, from the time the Germans started their attack on the Soviet Union on the 22nd of June 1941 to the time the Germans had an area under tight administrative control. And here, the local Slavic population (Belorussians, Poles and Russians) generally did nothing to hamper those escaping (unlike the situation further west, in ethnic Lithuania, where Lithuanian fascists began killing Jews and trapping or detaining would be escapees before the Germans even arrived). But here and there alike, the vast majority of Jews did not want to flee and leave everything behind and go to the dreaded Soviet Union (which is what it was for the vast majority).

And, the God-fearing ultra-peaceful Jewish population of Eastern Europe *did* believe in God's Will and the fate of Providence. Armed resistance was limited throughout the Holocaust to a tiny percentage, and tiny percentage consisted almost entirely of pre-war modern party types (Zionists, Bundists, Socialists, Communists and so forth). Many times on our travels we have heard of the town rabbi leading his people to the mass grave site on the orders of the German commander, and considering it his privilege to die together with his flock, leading them in the cry of *Shma Yisroel adoynoy eloyheynu adoynoy ekhod* ("Hear O Israel, God is our Lord, God is one" after Deuteronomy 6:4). For millennia it has been the traditional final utterance of Jews on the verge of being murdered on account of their Jewishness, an act known to traditional Judaism as *kidush-hashém,* which translates rather coldly as "the sanctification of the name [of God]").

Not only was it a population that knew nothing about guns and resistance. It was a people, most of whom believed in the

reality of paradise and the world to come with the same empirical certainty with which human consciousness beholds the sun, the moon and the stars.

Why then did Avrom-Yankev flee? He is the only fully observant Jew we have ever met on our travels.

"Something told me to join them. I don't know and I can't answer you. What I can tell you is that my father, who was a carpenter for most of the year and a traveling cantor around the holidays, died when I was nine years old, I used to visit his grave all the time, but now that part of the Jewish cemetery by the other end of the hill has become a swamp overgrown with high grasses I can't find it anymore. Anyway, he died when I was only nine. And on his deathbed he said to me: "Avrom-Yankev, you will outlive everybody, you are destined to a very long life," and, he gave me his prayerbook as his final gift. And when I saw those communists fleeing, it was as if my father said to me from heaven, "Never mind who they are, go with them my son. Run away." And so I did.

"There is another aspect you should understand. People with families, property, valuables, were understandably loathe to leave it all behind. I was a poor young bachelor, I wasn't good looking and no one wanted to marry me, I had nothing to worry about here in the way of wealth or dependents, and so I could pick myself up and go."

After a very long pause, he continues, handing over his prayerbook for us to inspect.

"Look closely. Hiding my prayerbook wasn't easy in the army. I broke the binding, divided it into four, hiding each fourth on one side of each of my boots. And I still have the boots. After all, those boots gave me the hiding-place for my prayerbook. My father, Shleime-Meir, gave it to me on his deathbed when he predicted my long life."

When Avrom-Yankev returned to Radashkovitz after the war, he learned that eight hundred and sixty Jews were burned alive, and the rest shot. He takes us to the various mass graves and we say kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead. Among

the victims were his mother Hinda, his sister Ettel, and three brothers, Leibbe, Ishiyye and Benyomin. "There are still peasants alive who saw everything. I hope someone is collecting the testimony from them now, when they are still around."

We go inside and drink a *l'chaim* with Avrom-Yankev. His thoughts return to his childhood before the war.

"We were very poor but we had many distant relatives who were rich. After my father's death different relatives fed me each day of the week. It was called *esn teg,* eating a day here and a day there. That wasn't only for yeshiva students, it was for anybody who couldn't afford to eat properly at home."

He wants us to see his huge garden. "Let me show you. Potatoes, small pod-beans, onions, peas, and beetroot. I reap them, just as my father and my grandfather did, in that order, all according to the Jewish holidays every fall. The potatoes, before Rosh-Hashona. The middle ones, in the various days between the holidays, and the beetroot right after Simchas-Torah is out. That means that I take from my garden only in the period of the year that is full of prayer to God, who gives us all this food."

Rosh-Hashona, the Jewish new year, launches the "High Holiday" season of Jewish festivals early each autumn. Simchas-Torah, celebration of God's having chosen the people of Israel as recipients of the Five Books of Moses, is the last of the series of autumn holidays.

One way or another, the question of the future come up. "I will never move from here. My mother, Hinda the daughter of Chaya-Tzira, a sister and three brothers perished here. We go back hundreds of years in Radashkovitz. The street was called *Dubrovsker gas,* now it's called "3rd of July Street," but who the hell cares what it's called now!"

Before saying goodbye, Avrom-Yankev wants to show us that he is not as poor as we think. He owns a goat. He opens the door to the barn behind the house, and starts talking in Yiddish to his goat. He explains that she should have been slaughtered a long time ago, because she gives no milk. He turns to the goat and starts talking to her.

"*Tzígalle-mígalle!* ("Little goat," from an old children's rhyme). Here, eat! Show me what a good *tzígalle* you are and give us, some milk one day, won't you, eh?"

MIR

When I was a boy in Brooklyn, I used to pass a huge rabbinical academy called the "Mirrer Yeshiva" going every day by bus from Boro Park to the Midwood/Flatbush section where my Hebrew day school was situated. In the early years, it was the marker, more or less of where the numbered streets and avenues of Boro Park (say 55th Street between 13th and 14th Avenues where we lived) suddenly became the "east streets" and "alphabet avenues" of Midwood (say Avenue J near East 16th Street where my day school stood). It was also a transition between a heavily hasidic area and a modern orthodox region, with the ultra-religious but non-hasidic Mirrer Yeshiva serving as The Jewish Border.

In later years our crowd began to wonder about the name of the place. Never associating the ultra orthodox with the bestest English spelling, many of us thought it was simply "Mirror" misspelled. Our crowd finally learned that it's the recreated yeshiva of a town called Mir, a town in Jewish Lithuania famous for its pre-Holocaust yeshiva. In fact, Mir has the rarified ring of exquisite scholarship in traditional Jewish circles, like Princeton or Yale universities in America (though only Valozhin, a yeshiva town not far from Mir, could lay claim to being the Harvard or the Oxford of the East European scene).

The yeshiva of Mir was set up in 1815 by Shmuel Tiktinsky and led by a succession of top Talmudic scholars right up to the Holocaust. (when many of the students were rescued, thanks to some absolutely uncanny Divine Guidance afforded to Rabbi Eliezer-Yehuda Finkel who didn't wait for the Germans. After the 1939 Soviet takeover of the region, he moved the students and teachers of his yeshiva to free Vilna in still-independent Lithuania, and onward to safety in Shanghai, thanks in no small measure to the towering figure of the Japanese envoy to Lithuania, Chiune "Sempo" Sugihara (1900—1986), who issued as many transit visas

as he could to help Jews escape. The survivors reestablished "Mir" in America and in Israel.

Like the other great Lithuanian Jewish academies, Mir was conceived in the spirit of the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797), who insisted on straightforward logic and common sense over hair-splitting casuistry. His method entailed a lot of what we would to day call textual criticism and textual reconstruction. If a passage makes no sense, it might well be because a corrupted version has reached us after thousands of years of recopying and the inevitable human propensity for error.

In the czarist period, Mir was in *Minsker gubernye* (the province of Minsk). Between the world wars, it was part of Poland. It then became part of the Belorussian S.S.R. until 1991, when Belarus became (well, sort of) independent. So, it becomes obvious that Yiddish cultural geography is wise to stick to its own categories and ignore the results of this or that invasion or *iberkérenish* (overthrowing of an old order).

Incidentally, Mir has a special Yiddish name too: *Damir* (da-MEER). Like every curious Yiddish word, Damir has two competing etymologies. Some Jews from the area insist that it is shortened from *in der Mir* ("in the Mir") which is used traditionally to speak of the yeshiva itself, for example a Jewish parent proclaiming proudly "Kh'ob a zun in der Mir" (I have a son in the Mir = a student at the yeshiva, as opposed to a resident of the town). But other etymologists point to the yeshiva calling itself formally *Yeshivo Gdoylo d'Mir* (the Great Yeshiva of Mir), in which the Aramaic derived *d'* means *of* or *from* (just as in some Romance languages). In this scenario, *Damir* is shortened from *d'Mir* (an Aramaic particle plus Mir adding up to "of Mir") rather than *der Mir* (adding up to a Yiddish Germanically derived definite article plus Mir).

To make matters better (or worse), both etymologies rely on Yiddish traditions going back many centuries. The use of "in the" with a place name has always been reserved in Yiddish for special places, such as *in der Lite* (in Lithuania). It makes sense that *in der Mir* in which *der* is reinterpreted as the first part of the name and

the whole of it becomes *Damir* should refer to a yeshiva, and by extension, a town famous to Jews because of it.

But backers of the second etymology will not be intimidated. The use of the Aramaic particle *d'* in Yiddish is older than the commonly known (though no longer genderly correct) *bobbe-mayse* (old wives' tale, literally "grandmother story"). That goes back to the great Yiddish author Elye Bocher (known to the scholarly Christian world as Elijah Levita, 1469—1549) whose early sixteenth century Yiddish masterpiece, in the complicated ottava rima form, was called *Bovo d'Antona* (Bovo of Antona, adopted from the Italian *Buovo d'Antona*). By the time this beloved book made it into Eastern Europe, the later editions were called *Bovo-bukh* or *Bovo-mayse* (story of Bovo). In Eastern Europe, the word for grandmother is *bobbe*; people forgot about old Bovo; the rabbis campaigned against secular stories being read instead of moralistic works; and the new Yiddish phrase *bobe-mayse* (untrue tale) was born.

But leaving this debate about the etymology of *Damir*, and noting that the Russian *mir* means "world" or "peace," we return to our journey to a little place called Mir.

We turn up. The oldest peasants tell us that there are no more Jews in town. But our scout Ziske the Barber refuses to take no for an answer and keeps asking until someone says "yes." We are sent to an old wooden house that it's in the "second back yard" in a maze of wooden houses and pathways set back from the street.

It is inhabited by Leeba Krinitzky (or Krinitshnaya), who was born in 1914 in, yes, Krinitshna (Kryniczne), a tiny hamlet outside Mir. She is a heavy set woman robed in a dress of many colors adorned by a bright red vest with large white buttons. Her attractive smile betrays a coquettishness and a love of company, people and talk that has not waned with age.

Her father Ruven grew potatoes (the luxury "pink" potatoes, she hastens to assure us, not the boring "white" ones), and owned a fine cow. The cow's milk and butter fetched good prices in Mir until disaster struck. "One winter night, a cow-thief tied four slippers onto its feet, so the prints would look human and mix with his own. It took a lot longer for anyone to realize that she had gone missing. The damned thief walked off with our beautiful cow."

We ask if they went looking for the cow. "Silly westerners!" Leeba barks at us. With strident vertical chops of her right arm, followed by rhythmic horizontal thrusts, and the clipped, loud utterance of the word "Mir," she is telling us, in her inimitable style, that the cow was chopped up into pieces and sent to the meat market in Mir. "Ah, the questions silly westerners can only ask!"

Leeba recalls that Krinitshna was as full of fun as Mir was straight-laced and pious. There were only five men in Krinitshna, and they didn't bother much with praying, except twice a year on holidays, when five more men, one of them a rabbi, were hired to come to Krinitshna to make up the minyen, the quorum of ten eligible males needed in Jewish law for communal prayer). "For us in Krinitshna, twice a year was just about right."

With a smile whose mischievous delight has not been dimmed, she lets us in on a secret. On more than one occasion, she had affairs with errant yeshiva students from Mir. She actually fell in love with one of them (albeit briefly), who had come from Berlin to acquire rabbinic ordination. "He was himself very much a German Jew, but when it came to Talmud, there was nothing like ordination from a *litvishe yeshive* (Lithuanian yeshivà), and believe you me, they knew it. Anyway he turned out to be just another religious bore!"

She became a communist in her teens and married a handsome young Belorussian communist. She remembers a Yiddish poem she wrote to him, and she starts singing it with teenage gusto.

In a levonediker nakht
beynkt mayn harts un veynt fun payn.

In a levonediker nakht
shpiglt op der Nyemen di shayn.

Shvimt mayn shifl vayt avek,
on a sof, on an ek.

Roughly:

In a moonlit night
in my heart yearns and cries from woe.

In a moonlit night
does the Nieman does reflect the glow.

And so my little boat sails far away
without an end, without a stay.

"That's the Nieman River that flows through my Krinitshna."

When Leeba ran off and married a man who was both Christian and a communist, it was a tragedy for her parents who did what some Jewish parents do to this day when a child "marries out": they "sat shiva," in other words carried out the seven-day mourning traditions for someone who has just died, which include sitting on the floor at home and weeping for the departed.

"Nu!" says Leeba, why don't you ask me what I did?"

"What did you do?"

"What did I do?? I put on a short dress with décolleté. Do you know what décolleté means? That's French, it is! I ran into my parents' home in Krinitshna, where the other few Jews, every one of them a dope, were comforting the folks, and said: "Idiots! Do I look dead to you?!" You should have seen the looks on their faces, ah!"

During those interwar years, when Mir was part of Poland, Leeba and her husband were among the small number of underground communists. She was arrested quite a few times by the Polish authorities on charges of subversive activities, and spent a lot of the thirties in the local prison. "I was guilty as sin," she boasts.

The young radical couple was fed up with life in bourgeois Poland, and decided they would cross the border, not too far to the east, to the Soviet Union. Her husband crossed first. But it was 1937, Stalin's hysteria about Polish spies was gripping the nation, and her husband was shot as a Polish spy. "He was of course completely innocent. You couldn't find a better socialist than him. I love him to this day though now in my eighties, I would consider getting married, even to a bourgeois capitalist. If you know somebody, tell him about me, won't you now?"

Leeba shows us her prized possession, a bronze bust of Lenin. She takes it off the top of the buffet, dusts it off, cuddles it and puts it near her by the table. "Lenin! That's who I believe in!"

She cuddles it and mumbles praise and thanksgiving to the founder of the Soviet state. The speed and cadences are more than a little reminiscent of the women's prayers (known as *tkhines*) uttered by her foremothers to God Almighty, the God of Sarah, of Rebecca, of Rachel, and of Leah.

She relishes our obvious shock and tells us off before we say a word. "The fascists murdered our people, and the communists saved the remnant that was left. What more do we need to care about, ah?" Lovingly, she presses the statuette to her lips.

"How can you still be a communist, when they shot your husband for nothing?"

"Ach! So what!" Leeba shrugs, her voice turning dismissive again. "You westerners understand nothing. Nothing! In a mass movement to change everything for the better, there have to be mistakes. And Stalin was a complete aberration anyway."

"Do you think Belarus has a good government today?"

"It has a wonderful government! Alexander Lukashenko is a *maladyéts* [wonderful guy, a man who pulls things off]. The trouble

is that the fascists won't let him work. But never mind, he knows what he's doing. One of the fascist opponents is in America, a second one is in jail and a third one is dead, so I am not worried. Our socialist life here will survive everything."

Although her husband did not live to relish it, one of the best days of Leeba Krinitzky's life was September 17th 1939.

"Sometimes in life, you work for something and it comes true. The Red Army marched into Mir in September 1939. The bourgeois Polish administration fled like mice into their holes, they didn't even put up a fight. We were liberated! We were Soviet citizens right here in Mir!"

Like the other pre-war underground communists, Leeba was given a prestigious job in the newly Sovietized city hall. She was also asked to lecture and help reeducate young people in town to the Marxist way of thinking. Although she had lost her husband to Stalin's excesses, her bigger cause in life was fulfilled.

But it wasn't to last very long. June 22nd 1941. The Germans had launched their deadly attack on the Soviet held sectors in Operation Barbarossa. This time it was her beloved Red Army that was fleeing, not the capitalist interwar Polish administration. Leeba, ever truthful to herself, remembers Soviet officers being punished severely (by "stupid people") for predicting an attack from Stalin's German "allies."

As one of the local leaders, Leeba, a dashing young beauty, was offered a place in one of the first army vehicles to evacuate eastward.

Leeba turned down the offer, and "hastily relocated" to the nearby forest to start the local partisan unit. "I don't run away from things! I called them cowards for running. We must stay and fight until every last German fascist is killed or running for his life. Let me tell you something, had the rest of the town joined me and our small group, everything would have been different."

She goes into another room for a longish time, and re-emerges wearing a dress with its twelve medals and Order of Lenin. She led the partisan resistance until the liberation of Mir in 1944. And, perched high on a tree with binoculars, she saw the Belorussian fascist commandant Siemion Serafimowicz direct the mass shooting of Jews who were marched, as it happened, to her native Krinitshna, where she helplessly saw her parents and siblings among those who were made to lie face down in the snow and shot.

Serafimowicz turned up in Britain in 1947 as a "refugee" and lived for decades in the same semi in Barnstead, Surrey, with his Polish born wife Jadwiga. He worked as a carpenter. His crimes are detailed In Nechama Tec's *In the Lion's Den: the Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, a book dedicated to the life of Leeba's friend Rufeisen (1922—1998), a Polish Jew who passed himself off as a Christian, and pretended to work for the Germans (and for Serafimowicz) while saving many Jewish lives. He converted to Catholicism and ended up as the celebrated Brother Daniel, Carmelite priest in Haifa, Israel. But that is another story.

If Leeba is the less "sung" of the two heroes of Mir, she is not the lesser. Though a staunch communist, she would not dream of converting from Judaism. And, while Rufeisen risked his life deceiving his German masters and passing information to the partisans, it was Leeba who led those partisans in the forests.

In 1993, Leeba Krinitzky — better known in recent years as Lyuba Voronovitch — was brought to London by Scotland Yard's Detective Inspector Howard Chapman (the only trip in her life away from the environs of Mir), to record evidence against Serafimowicz, the "Butcher of Mir." During a brief exchange in Parliament on December 2nd 1993, the Secretary of State for the Home Department was asked to make a statement on the status of Siemion Serafimowicz as a resident in the United Kingdom to which Mr. Charles Wardle responded: "It is not our practice to make public information from immigration records relating to individuals." Proceedings dragged along until an Old Bailey Jury found Serafimowicz medically unfit to stand trial, on January 17th 1997. It was fifty-five years to the day, January 17th1942, since

Leeba had seen him lead the murder of the Jews of Krinitshna, including her entire family. Just for being Jews.

We talk and talk some more. She sets a table of bread and potatoes ("not as good as my father's, these are white, I'm afraid"), and opens a bottle of vodka. "The best in the world, I once tasted the vodka from *there*, your places, feh!"

We toast Leeba's health. She begins to weep. "I haven't heard the word *l'chaim* for about half a century. Come to think of it, I haven't spoken Yiddish for half a century."

Our driver and "commander" Pioter enjoys his tipple. It's clear that we are not going anywhere that night. And, Leeba, again invoking French, warns us that the local government-owned hotel is known as "*Le Vantz* in French" (*vantz* is Yiddish for "bedbug"). We all stay the night in her little hut.

Next morning, we tell Leeba that we would like to see the place where the world famous Mir yeshiva stood. For all her personal disbelief in religion, Leeba has huge respect for the serious scholarship that went on there, and like all prewar Jews she knew what each and every building was. And they are all still standing.

Leeba shows us the entire complex of buildings that once belonged to the yeshiva. They house everything now from a post office to a government shop to a college for advanced agriculture (actually not all that advanced, by the look of things; it is reminiscent of the Museum to Economic Progress in various dumpy Soviet cities).

And, Leeba shows us the surviving synagogue buildings. There is not a single historic sign about anything Jewish to be seen anywhere, except at one of the mass grave sites.

Then we visit what is left of the old Jewish cemetery. There are some magnificent huge rabbinic stones with intricate Talmudic inscriptions and many smaller ones. During subsequent visits over the years, we find fewer and fewer stones. Like other Jewish cemeteries in Belarus, the local authorities and local individuals feel equally free to take stones for foundations, ballast and other building and stone-walling needs. There are no signs or laws telling

anyone not to. To the contrary, the old Soviet law about a cemetery losing its status if nobody has been buried there for twenty-five years is a legal green light. And among a murdered population, there are not likely to be any more burials. In many towns the local government forbade the families of the handful of surviving Jews to bury their dead there, precisely so the cemetery could be "undone." And if the government can do it, then surely citizens need feel no hesitation.

But on that first visit to Leeba, it was time for us to say goodbye and move on. She doesn't want to let us go, and we don't want to leave.

As we accompany Leeba back to her house, we notice in the bright midday sunlight the top half of a broken Jewish gravestone lying on the grass, right in front of the house. The Hebrew inscription reads, in Ashkenazic Hebrew: *isho kh'shuvo viykoro, Moras Gitil* ("An eminent and dear woman, Ms. Gittel). I ask what it's doing there.

"Well, I may want to live a communist but I want to die a Jew! My neighbors have promised to put it on my grave when I die."

We wish her health to the proverbial hundred-and-twenty years, and respectfully point out that her name is Leeba, not Gittel, and ask why she would want a gravestone with somebody else's name on it.

She bursts out laughing. "Ah, the questions only silly westerners can only ask! Who will ever be able to read it here in Mir? Leeba, Shmeeba! Gittel, Shmittel! What difference does it make?"

Epilogue

Year after year, we did our best to adjust our return routes from various parts of Belarus to our Lithuanian base in order to visit with Leeba of Mir on the way home. She seemed never to age, and her good humor seemed to sharpen like mature wine. "Where is my husband that you were going to find me? I told you that at this stage I don't care if he's a blood sucking capitalist leech from America! Nu?"

It is not easy to convey the pain experienced when a charming neighbor, Valery Ilyich Beshko, who had invited us in past years and always kept an eye on Leeba, told us the following story in the year 2000.

"Leeba would go every year to rest up at a sanatorium, and always came back looking ten years younger. She returned to Mir on November 19th. She didn't sleep at home that night because it was too cold, and slept over at a neighbor's.

"Early on November 20th she stoked the furnace until her house was warm, and she stayed at home. On the 21st she was at a neighbor's for a memorial gathering, and returned home after dark. At about eight in the evening some neighbors spoke with her on the phone, but there was no sign of anything untoward. At about eleven at night I was having a smoke, sitting near the stairs at our house. I could see the light emitted by the television, but heard nothing special.

"On Monday morning the 22nd, her former tenant Sasha Khilevitch brought her milk, as always. The door was locked, so he left the bottle by her door and went to work. He returned late in the afternoon, before sundown, and the door was still locked, the milk still standing. Sasha came over to our place and asked where Leeba is, to give her the milk and see how she's doing. We didn't know but assumed that she wasn't feeling too well and preferred to stay alone inside, which was her habit on such occasions.

"By nightfall, a light snow had fallen, and there were no footprints near her door. My wife and I and Sasha, the three of us,

approached her house, a bit worried by now, and looked through the window with a torch. We could see various household items scattered about the floor. Leeba kept everything in immaculate order. Sasha, a medical assistant in an ambulance, assumed she was ill and scattered things while frantically looking for medicine.

"But then we saw that one window was missing, frame and all. In the hallway inside we could see the window frame without its glass. We squeezed Sasha, the most agile of us, through the window frame opening and into the hallway. I followed.

"The second door, leading into one of the rooms, was open. At first, we found no sign of Leeba. We even searched the cellar because the manhole leading to it was opened. We moved on to the bedroom.

"Under blankets and clothing, all piled up, Sasha found Leeba's body. The telephone was cut off so we called the police from our place. The scene was horrific. When the police inspector and his team arrived, they forced the front door open, and we were invited to be present during the initial investigation of the premises.

"Leeba was lying between two beds on the floor in the bedroom. One linen rope was tied around her neck. A second rope was tied through her mouth and went around her head covering both ears. Her head was badly broken, and all covered in blood. Near her hand a wood-toothed cylinder lay, covered in blood. Leeba's hands were also covered in blood. She has obviously defended herself vigorously. The mattress, pillows, bed sheets were all in blood, too. There was blood on the handle of the door leading to the kitchen. But there were no fingerprints anywhere. The murderer had taken medals, and photographs, and had broken the portrait of her grandson Igor who lives in St. Petersburg.

"After a day, the detectives allowed her son Leo and other relatives to come into the room. He reported that a little bit of money had apparently disappeared from her handbag (perhaps the two pensions she received on the eve of the murder). Some bottles of spirit were also missing. That was all that had disappeared, as far as her son and daughter-in-law knew."

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, is of the opinion that "the murder of Leeba Krinitzky has something to do with the Serafimowicz case."

Will anyone ever properly investigate the murder of the last Jew of Mir?

ABOLNIK

A number of somber characteristics render the Holocaust "different" from many other national Jewish tragedies over the millennia, from the sacking of Jerusalem in 586 BC by the Babylonians, its burning in 70 AD by the Romans, right through to the pogroms of the early twentieth century. In the ancient world, cruel as victorious armies were to kings and warriors, they generally exiled the mass of simple people so that they would lose their national identity. That is what happened, in fact, to the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, when it was conquered by Assyria. Nothing remains of its ten tribes, except for wistful legends and ambitious rumors. The two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah, managed after their exile, by contrast, to become what we would today anachronistically call an ethnic minority, one that has survived through the ages.

In medieval Europe, major calamities borne of religious and ethnic intolerance struck both major branches of European Jewry: the Sephardim (Jews in Spain and Portugal) were subject to the Spanish Inquisition most potently associated with the year 1492. And, from the first of the Crusades in 1096 through many centuries in the central European lands of the Ashkenazim (Jews on Germanic speaking territories), massacres and expulsions were brutal and frequent.

But in nearly all these European cases, entire communities were usually not slaughtered without being given the offer to avoid death or expulsion by converting and wholeheartedly accepting Christianity. Some Jews did, some (especially in Spain) retained secret ties to their ancient heritage, but in general, the prevailing Jewish response was *kidush-hashém*. In Jewish lore (and law) it has become a term for choosing even the most violent death over betraying one's faith. Strange as it may sound to modern Jews brought up in western civilization, this willingness to "die without

a fight" was in inherent — and proud — component of the deepest culture of our immediate ancestors.

The lack of a choice to abandon Judaism to save one's skin is of course not the only unique facet of the Holocaust. In all those medieval horrors, intolerant rulers and mobs attacked Jews on their own territory or adjacent territory they were seeking to annex. None ever made the vision of a Jew-free world into their nation's mission, hence none ever traveled to distant places *just* to kill Jews, none compromised their own military efforts *just* to kill the highest number of Jews.

The lack of a conversion option during the Holocaust is most straightforwardly explained by the transformation of an old religious hatred into a new (perhaps nineteenth century) brand of ethnic hatred which was brought in that dreadful twentieth century to its most barbaric fruition. You can change your religion but not your ethnicity.

In Belarus, we have usually succeeded to find one or two Jews in many towns, throughout the 1990s, and in some cases, to this day. In the modern state of Lithuania, there are almost no Jews left in smaller towns. When we asked many Jews in Vilna (Vilnius) and Kovna (Kaunas), they explained that after the Holocaust, they would not dream of returning to the Lithuanian towns of their youth where so many of their neighbors either collaborated with the Nazis, or could barely contain their glee at the murder of the town's Jewish population back in 1941. In Belarus, where the average Slav was pro-Soviet and anti-Nazi, such feelings are rarely to be found; it is only "good old anti-Semitism" that is sometimes referred to, not pro-Nazi death plans regarding the Jewish minority.

Well, that is our observation in accounting for the difference between the post war Jewish minorities in the two countries after a decade of traipsing through both.

But not being the types to just take "no" and go away, our expeditionary party — Pioter, Ziske and Dovid — developed the habit of "hanging about" on the town square for several hours, and continuing to ask sympathetic looking oldsters about Jewish life, the remains of the Jewish cemetery, synagogue buildings and

so forth. We would gingerly come to the topic of surviving Jews. What we discovered is, that in many Lithuanian towns, if you ask long enough you could still get a "yes" through much of the 1990s. That is not to say that an old babushka coming out of church can conjure up an old local Jew in her laboratory. It is to say that there are Christians, invariably women, who were saved by the local priest in 1941 after allowing themselves to be baptized. This episode is tied up with many delicate matters. Often the priest was risking his life by hiding a Jew, baptized or not. Sometimes the baptism was genuine for both baptizer and baptized, sometimes an act to save another human being. And sometimes there were romantic and sexual aspects. And sometimes financial.

From the viewpoint of the Yiddish dialectologist and cultural historian, these women are absolute treasures. Not having spoken or heard a word of Yiddish since (in most cases) the summer of 1941, the Yiddish that they do come out with (and almost nobody forgets their native language) is the bona fide pre-1941 local Yiddish of that shtetl. Their memories of pre-war life are an early and starkly contrastive part of their biography, that just cannot become confused over the years with any kind of postwar Jewish reality, whether in Eastern Europe on in the lands of migration abroad.

Reactions vary enormously. In one town, such a woman started weeping: "My father was a rabbi and look what became of me." Another by contrast, said: "I came to understand that it's important to believe that Messiah has already come, and I ask of God to help you to believe it too."

These isolated conversions in various Lithuanian communities deserve a special study. Was it only women who were saved? What was asked of them besides baptism? What do they believe today and what role do they play in the Christian religious establishments of their parishes? Time is running out for such a study, too.

There is only one famous case in all Lithuania where "group conversion" became an anguished community decision. That is the shtetl known in older Yiddish as Abolnik (a-BOLL-nik), more recently as Vabólnik, and in Lithuanian today, Vabalninkas. It is in northern Lithuania, northeast of the famed yeshiva town Ponevezh (now Panevežys), not too far from the Latvian border.

The Lithuanian Catholic priest offered conversion to the local Jewish *community* as a way of saving themselves. Forty or so took it up. They were baptized in the days following the Nazi occupation of June 1941.

The late Berl Kagan (1911—1993), one of the primary historians of the Holocaust in Lithuania, has called the mass conversion "an extraordinary if not unique case in Lithuania." His account appears in one of his contributions to the now-classic volume *Líte, vol. I,* that appeared in New York in 1951, and will hopefully one day soon appear in English translation.

Kagan (known as Kahn in Yiddish literary circles) cites local reports that the converts felt they were only doing what the marranos of Spain and Portugal had done before them: saving their lives by participation in a Christian ritual, with the intention of returning to the fold when times get better. After all, *Kol-nidrei* is one of the most awe-inspiring prayers in the Jewish psyche. Its Aramaic text is a straightforward nullification of oaths and vows that had been made under duress. The people who once made those vows and asked God to accept their nullification, are now sanctified, not vilified, on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

According to Kagan's sources, the Lithuanian priest had told the would-be converts that he was not out to "win souls" and just wanted to save their lives by performing the baptismal ceremony. They would do what they wanted later on. In other words, he tried to save as many Jewish lives as he could.

The priest's discussions with the Jews of Vabolnik triggered anguished, panicked deliberations within a Jewish community facing imminent annihilation. They found that major rabbinic authorities had permitted marrano-type conversions in life-and-death situations. The buzz-word in the community became *ad yavor*

zaam ("until the storm passes over"), from Isaiah 26:20. Rendering *zaam* as "indignation," the King James version has:

Come, my people,
enter thou into thy chambers,
and shut thy doors about thee:
hide thyself as it were for a little moment,
until the indignation be overpast.

But the priest had overestimated his authority, and underestimated the Jew-hating bloodthirst of the Nazis and their local collaborators, including, alas, a number of Lithuanian Catholic priests, who would come to witness the mass killings in a sign of approval in many a Lithuanian town in the summer and autumn of 1941.

In the summer of 1941, the converts were shipped to nearby Posvol (Pasvalys) along with all the other Jews. It is not hard to imagine how they were looked upon by the vast majority of the town's Jews for whom conversion, real, faked, temporary or trumped-up, would never be an option, for whom *kidush-hashém* was the first and only solution. The baptized members of the community thought they had been tricked. When they arrived at Posvol, however, they were separated from the rest and taken away. At that moment, they thought they had not been tricked, and that their baptism had indeed rescued them. It is to be remembered that the Holocaust is not only about mass murder of all members of a race but also about infliction of the maximal pain, suffering and humiliation, and this is as good an example as any.

The end of Abolnik Jewry came on the 27th of August 1941. The Jews, incarcerated in the ghetto in Posvol, were assembled in the synagogue, which was outside the ghetto area. They were told they are being taken for labor, and should therefore bring their few belongings with them. After arrival, the men were separated from the women and children, who were taken to the Lithuanian elementary school on Vilna Street. Everyone was shot in shifts that day in an area of woods at Zaidekan, some two and a half miles from Posvol. The murderers were all Lithuanian "partisans" working under German supervision. The converts were reunited

with the other Jews minutes before the mass shootings and killed along with the rest.

None of the converts survived.

❊

Or so it was thought. We stumbled upon one here in Utyan (oot-YAN, now Utena), southeast of Vabolnik. We came to Utyan looking for the last elderly Jew in town, Chaim Druskin. His name had been provided in Vilna. But we came too late. His four charming middle-aged children, Sorrala, Dovid, Shiye and Avremke, born between 1949 and 1964, are all Yiddish speakers though they were the only Jewish family in town. They received us warmly and told of their father's recent death, with deep regret that we had not come a year or two earlier.

"Are there any other elderly Jews in town?" we ask. "No, he was the last," they assured us. We visited the local mass grave site. Completely unknown to them, though they lived out their lives here, there is also a large remnant of the old pre-war Jewish cemetery. This is a phenomenon we have encountered repeatedly: middle aged Jews who *are* interested in their town's Jewish heritage relate exclusively to the mass grave and all the questions about the memorial monument to be placed at its site, with little or no knowledge the older Jewish cemetery. In some cases, this has to do with the shame of helplessness about the constant desecration and dismantling of the old burial ground and its stones, and not wanting to "start up" with local authorities. Since its independence in 1991, modern Lithuania has fenced in, signposted and safeguarded its surviving Jewish cemeteries (or cemetery remnants), in sharp contrast to the situation across the border in Belarus.

We bade our farewells to the Druskins and headed out of town. Upon reaching the city limits, marked throughout Eastern Europe by a sign with the town's name and a diagonal line through it, all three of us felt an inexplicable urge to return and "look for something more."

Our "scout" Ziske Shapiro stood himself in the town center for over an hour asking older people if there are any other Jews living here, Jewish buildings, Jewish sites, Jewish whatever. He is repeatedly told that there aren't, until an elderly woman tells him to go to the church and speak to the woman who is begging for pennies, sitting on a shaky stool by the church gate.

Ziske speaks fluent colloquial Lithuanian. He grew up in Ignalina, part of Poland in the interwar period, but right near the border with independent Lithuania and with a sizable Lithuanian population. But now we are not in the Vilna district that the Poles captured in 1920 and held on to until September 1939. We are in deep proper ethnic Lithuanian territory, and to get anywhere here with sensitive topics, it's Lithuanian, not Russian or Polish, that is needed to do the trick.

Ziske approaches the beggar. They talk for a while and he returns and knocks on my shoulder with several door-knock like taps. This is Ziske's way of saying, "This is important, please can I have your attention?"

Tearfully, Ziske reports that a Jewish woman who saved herself during the war by converting in Abolnik now lives here in Utyan. For Ziske every drop of the Holocaust is an individual tragedy, he is not interested in larger perspectives, and not very sympathetic to my thought that at least she is alive today to be found and will hopefully speak to us. But our own little discussion, on the way to the car, is cut short by our joint realization that in our excitement we did not get the lady's address.

We return to the church, but the beggar is gone, and our search now turns for *her*. An hour is lost as we trace her to the hovel that is her home. Here, she demands a dollar bill ("Vashington" in her terms) for her services. We provide it cheerfully. But she is insulted, complaining that the note is dirty and crumpled. She demands a "nice one." We finally found one that met with her approval, and she gave us the address. (Across the border in Belarus, dollars are often not accepted at all if marked or otherwise imperfect.)

We turn up in front of the convert's house. We are prepared to have the door slammed in our faces, as it had been on occasion,

when approaching converts who go on thinking that "nobody knows" when in fact "everyone knows. . ." On *that* score, we've confronted denial of conversion much more in Belarus than in Lithuania. Not a simple world out here.

Ziske knocks first and explains in Lithuanian that we are on a non-political, non-religious academic expedition to record Yiddish dialects and folklore and songs from before the war. (I rehearsed the text with him extensively and warned him not to get into a "friendly fight" with the lady, as he so enjoys doing with strangers on the road. Ziske had come to see himself as a soldier of God in finding truth on our expeditions, and his sometimes Chaplainesque charm could on one or two occasions be compromising.)

The elderly but healthy looking lady peeking out the door asks to see the others (the two of us waiting in the car). The air had turned icy, and after a long pause, she says "Come in."

The woman's appearance is striking. Her hair is pure white, her eyebrows pure black, and her eyes are huge, round and black. She is wearing a multicolored dress and two headshawls, one of many hues, and one black. Her arms are tightly crossed, and seem to be locked in that position.

Her first reaction to us seemed to be one of mild annoyance. "How did you find out about me?"

But that was rapidly replaced by a major sigh of relief. "I thought I would die without telling anyone about my life," she says, now relaxed and working at a trace of a smile in a corner of her upper lip, as if she were happy to be getting this off her chest.

We ask several times if she speaks any Yiddish. "No, it's so many years, I've forgotten, I speak only Lithuanian, and a little bit of Russian." So she tells her story in Lithuanian, and a line for a line, Ziske translates into Yiddish. She asks that we not reveal her current Lithuanian name during her lifetime and we agree.

"Never mind what they all call me today, my *real* name is Feygitchka Yoffe. I was born in Vabalninkas [Abolnik] in 1922. My father, Peretz Yoffe, was born in Pumpėnai [Yiddish Pumpyán], which is on the road to Šiauliai [Shavl]. He moved to

Vabalninkas when he married my mother, who came from an old Abolnik Jewish family," she adds, switching to the town's Yiddish name. After a pause she continues:

"My mother used to tell me that her ancestors were among the first to settle there, many hundreds of years ago. She said that our family hailed from some great rabbi who wrote a code of law, he was called Mordche Yoffe."

By now, Feygitchka (FAY—gitsh—keh) sees the excitement on my face. She must be referring to Mordechai Yoffe (Mordecai Jaffe, approx. 1535—1612), known in rabbinic circles as "the Levúsh" after his famous commentaries on the codes of law. By now Ziske is about to burst into tears at what is left of this great scholar's descendants in Lithuania (if indeed she is a descendant). I warn him to stay calm and perform his role as our translator! In these situations, I would knock on Ziske's back as a signal.

Feygitchka wants to speak not of rabbis, but of a priest, the priest who saved her.

"When I was a child in Abolnik, the priest always greeted me warmly on the street. I guess he had a soft spot for me, but to tell you the truth, he was nice to all the Jewish children. He used to give us candy.

"I was nineteen years old when the Germans came in 1941. The priest converted a whole bunch of Jews, thinking it would save their lives, but of course, all he could do was baptize them and hope this would help them. He was a good man, a holy man.

"Then there came a moment when it seemed that the converts would be killed too. That's when he told me that if I were to convert, he would hide me inside the church and I would *really* be safe. He baptized me and hid me.

"But after a few hours I began to cry uncontrollably. My parents, who were not among the converts, were in the ghetto, doomed. It was still possible to go in and out if you knew the right people. I begged the priest to take my parents into the church as well, and he said yes. "If they agree to be baptized, I will hide them here, too, and they too will be safe." You must remember that not only the Germans but the Lithuanian fascists too would have torn

this wonderful Lithuanian priest limb from limb, if they found out he was hiding Jews!

"I ran to tell my parents the good news. They wept and my mother said to me . . ."

There is a very long pause, better described perhaps as an intermission.

All the while, her elderly Catholic husband is growing ever more furious that his wife never told him any of this. He sits listlessly, his long white hair frozen in mid-air, as in a wax museum. Husband and wife are sitting in front of a book case, on top of which stands a crucifix and an icon of the Virgin Mary. The house is full of Catholic pictures and ornaments. Although the couple are sitting on the same settee, the gulf between them seems to be expanding by the minute.

Without warning, Feygitchka's arms unlock, she says "Oy" loudly, and bangs down upon the sofa on either side with the palms of her hands. Something has snapped.

As if by magic, she bursts into rhythmic and rapid Yiddish, not the rusty, halting kind one might expect from somebody who had not spoken a language (even a native language) well over sixty years.

Hot di mamme gezogt:

Efsher iz beser dortn geyn, un efsher iz beser do blaybn. Du gey, mayn kind. Mir veln do blaybn, un mir veln zikh trefn af yene velt.

[So my mother said: "Maybe it's better to go there, and maybe it's better to stay here. You go, my child. We will stay here, and we shall meet again in the world to come."]

"And so," Feygitchka continues the narrative in Yiddish, "I said goodbye to my mother and to my father. They were shot along with all the Jews. I married a Catholic and after many years he died. I then married this gentile you see sitting next to me. He's an expert, a big expert, on all the local churches!"

The tone toward her husband is somewhat ambivalent, and it is hard to discern whether this is recovered Yiddish humor or some actual disdain. For "gentile" she uses the word *orl* (from traditional Hebrew *oreyl*, literally "uncircumcised fellow"), and for "church," the not-particularly complimentary term *tifle*. All the while, he sits icily.

But she insists on her absolute belief that Messiah has come, using the traditional Yiddish term *Meshiekh*. What makes it a little shocking in Yiddish, more than anything else, is perhaps the grammar. In Yiddish, it is not *the* Messiah; *Meshiekh* functions as a personal name, even declining in the objective cases (to *Meshiekhn*), falling the pattern for personal names. In other words, this is all very different from an abstract theological discussion in the west. To save her life, Feygitchka did not have to start believing in some strange new god, she merely had to accept that the same *Meshiekh* whom she heard her community pray for all those years had "once made it down to earth." Not a very big philosophical concession to save a life, she makes it clear, all the while insisting in her firm belief. She even goes so far to explain that were she to stop believing that *Meshiekh* had come, the priest would have sinned by saving her "for nothing."

Feygitchka's Yiddish is one of the purest, bona-fide pre-war dialects we have ever encountered. The language she has just excavated from within is the old Yiddish of Abolnik, untouched by subsequent history, unaffected by other varieties of Yiddish.

All the while we cannot get over that this lady may be descended, as she claims, from her namesake, the great Rabbi Mordechai Yoffe of Prague — "the Levúsh" — who had spent some years as head of a yeshiva in Grodna and was one of the founders of the great Talmudic traditions of Lithuania. His is one of the central rabbinic commentaries to the *Shulkhon Orukh* (*Shulhan Arukh*), the famed sixteenth century code of Jewish law. To think that his probable descendant Feygitchka Yoffe would one day be the sole survivor of the slaughter of Abolnik in 1941, that she would save herself by agreeing that *Meshiekh* had already made it to earth once, is a little much for us all.

Some traditionally religious Jews would say that the Levush is full of wrath and shame in whatever heaven he's at nowadays. Others would say, again, using traditional Jewish lore, that it is because of the *zkhus* (merit) of the Levush that she was spared.

We talk and talk some more. It is getting late and we cannot put off the difficult goodbye much longer.

As we begin to make our way out, Feygitchka says: "I wish I had stayed with my parents. They loved me and I loved them. My mother had a good head on her shoulders. I was an idiot."

As the car door is about to be shut, she whispers: "I've probably forgotten how to read Yiddish, but I am not really sure. Do you think you could send me a Yiddish book, maybe?"

And, as we drive away, she shouts:

"Zayt gezunt!"

DRISA

Whether it's the Polish town of Chelm (as Chelmno is known in Yiddish), or Missouri for many Americans, there are places that remain inherently funny, no matter how hard their natives work to be taken seriously.

In the case of Drisa (Yiddish DREE-seh), a picturesque town on the northern bank of the river Dvina (now in northwestern Belarus), the root of the town's humorous infamy is not too hard to trace. It's name sounds disturbingly close to a not-very-elegant Russian word for certain stomach troubles. Some local historians insist the town acquired the name when Catherine the Great passed through and became ill with this ailment. And so, the townspeople themselves have enjoyed the humor of it all for centuries.

As a result, Belorussians and Russians round about call the town "Izvinitye Drisa" ("Pardon-me, Drisa" as in "I'll be going to Pardon-me-Drisa tomorrow"). This was picked up in Yiddish. People started calling this place "Bimkhíle Dríse" (from *bimkhile* "asking your pardon"). One of the obvious factors behind the wealth of Yiddish is the multiplicity of etymological sources. Three Yiddish synonyms, one say from Germanic, one from Semitic and one from Slavonic, always turn out on closer inspection to have finely nuanced differences. "Bimkhíle" is not used in Yiddish when asking forgiveness for some serious sin. It is most frequently invoked before using an off-color word. And what is off-color changes from one generation to the next. The great Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem (1859—1916) used the phrase *Bimkhíle takhtóynim* ("pardon-me underpants"), for example. So what happened to poor Drisa is that the Yiddish name for the town, *Bimkhíle-Dríse*, has a rather sharper edge than the Russian from which it derives.

Various political leaders have tried to come to Drisa's rescue. Finally, on December 25th, 1962, Premier Nikita Khrushchev did

what no one before had dared attempt. He issued a decree changing Drisa's name, as the Yiddish saying goes, "forever and a Wednesday," to — *Verkhnedvinsk*. But even that seems to have backfired. People in the area have had far too much fun with the name Drisa to just drop it. Many other name changes in what is now Belarus had to do with politics. Ihumen is famous to Yiddishists as the birthplace of the great Yiddish poet H. Leivick (1888—1962), but because this Belorussian word has a religious ("clericalist") connotation (it means "abbot"), the Soviets changed it to Tsherven (the Belorussian word for "June," after the month when it fell to the Red Army). Koidenov, known as the town of one of the first families of Yiddish culture, the Raisins, among them poet Avrom Raisin 1876—1953) and literary historian Zalmen Raisin (Reyzen, 1887—1940) was chosen for the honor of being renamed Dzerzhinsk, for the founder of the Soviet *cheka,* Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, after his sudden collapse and death in 1926.

But Drisa was different. It's name was not unkosher politically, but the butt of jokes. And, in the absence of any great communist dying just when the government decided to come to the rescue, the town was renamed Verkhnedvinsk which means "Upper Dvinsk." Well, it backfired. Drisa, Verkhnedvinsk, or whatever-ya-wanna-call-it is a charmingly backward place, that you still have to get into by an old wooden barge-cum-ferry that runs on dragropes (just like in my father's books on Michaleshik, except that here, on territory that became Soviet in the First World War, the ferry still runs; in Michaleshik, the conquering Poles were quick to build a bridge in the early 1920s).

Further down the Dvina stands the famous city *Dvinsk* (once upon a time *Dinaburg* under German rule, now *Daugavpils* in Latvia), which is of course a proper city, and has been for centuries. As the ferryman put it to us, "If this is Upper Dvinsk, I'd hate to have to go looking for Lower Dvinsk. . ."

Moreover, Drisa has been a town to laugh about in Yiddish in a completely different context. For hundreds of years, Jews in Vilna and its region made fun of the three D's "way up north," referring to Drisa, Disna, and Druya (not necessary in that order),

where the people spoke with a very heavy *rrr*. Vilna wagoners would quip: "Fun Drrrise biz Drrruye iz drrray-un-drrraysik vyorrrst" ("It's 33 viorsts from Drisa to Druya"), laying on the r's thick and mighty. The viorst, by the way, still used by old folk all these decades after its abolition, is a little more than a kilometer (1.067 to be exact), hence its survival in the days of kilometers (in miles a viorst comes to a little over 66.3% of a mile).

There are a handful of Jews in Drisa, only one of them a native of the town. She is Sheina Beilin (Batushansky by marriage). She still lives in the wooden house she grew up in. Its backyard backs onto the Dvina River. In the interwar years, when Sheina was growing up, the river marked the Soviet-Polish border. There were skirmishes between the two armies, and people who tried to cross the border in either direction by swimming across the river were often shot.

Sheina was born in 1921. In her earliest youth there was still a flourishing cheider (traditional Jewish elementary school), but she recalls the establishment of the new Soviet Yiddish school, which she attended. Everything was taught in Yiddish, including arithmetic, geography, history and Russian literature. Jewish holidays were still observed and the local Soviet authorities here, as in other points we've come to in northern Belarus had a policy of gradual Sovietization (at least until around 1937). Thus, Sheina remembers one synagogue continuing to function until then, but with an ever dwindling an older following.

Sheina's unpaved street was once known as *afn zamd* (on the sand). It had no special name. The highlight of her childhood was the Soviet Yiddish school, and its head teacher, Sarah Levovna Mohilevsky, whom the children affectionately called *Di lererke Sonye* (Teacher Sonia).

Sheina was the star pupil, and her life's dream was to one day become a Yiddish teacher herself. She was accepted to the *Yidisher pedagogisher tekhnikum* (Yiddish Pedagogical College) in Vitebsk, and

moved with the college to Minsk in 1937, completing her degree as an elementary school Yiddish teacher in 1938. The diploma, dated September 4th 1938, is a huge document listing twenty-nine courses completed. The list, headed by Yiddish language and literature, includes Russian, Belorussian, German, history, art, physical education, economics and much more. The only subject that really catches the western eye is "Constitution of the Soviet Union," a sort of analogue to "Civic Studies" or the like, and in the context of twenty-nine courses, the others being very universal, one is nowadays impressed at the status of Yiddish in the Soviet Union before everything changed.

For Sheina, its was not meant to be. After working as a Yiddish teacher for a couple of weeks in 1938 in Minsk, Stalin's regime closed the Yiddish school there and the colleges that produced their teachers. Instead of returning a heroine to her native Drisa, she returned unemployed. Her beloved school had been closed beforehand. She was unceremoniously sent to a nearby village to do some menial agricultural work.

Sheina took it with her when she fled Hitler's advancing forces in 1941, and brought it back to Drisa after the war, when there were regional shortages of qualified Russian and Belorussian teachers. The education authorities did what they did with many other talented young teachers with useless Yiddish teacher diplomas: they quietly exchanged the Yiddish diploma for a Russian or Belorussian teacher's diploma, and that was the end of that. Sheina is the only one we've met who managed to keep and treasure her old one as a memento. She keeps it in an old fashioned treasure chest in the house of her youth where she still lives today.

Sheina sizes us up quickly, and tells us frankly that she feels uncomfortable talking to foreigners these days. She picks up the local newspaper with an article on Stalin's "Doctors" Plot" of 1953 (which wildly accused the American Joint Distribution Committee and other Jewish bodies in complicity in the deaths of various Soviet officials). "Without commentary!" she says, her eyes swelling up. She also mentions that she doesn't trust the young policeman who rents a room in her now dilapidated but still very

spacious house. No fool, she figures out how to dispense with these uninvited guests, and having heard her fears, we are not the least bit offended, though baffled as to whether her fears are justified or recreative of her painful past.

"I see you're after interesting characters. Well, I'm sorry I'm not a very interesting character. I'm just a retired Russian teacher. But there are two fellows in town who fit your bill. They are the best of friends and worst of enemies. They weren't born in Drisa, but you won't find any more real *Driser* (Jewish natives of Drisa) than these guys. They've lived here more than half a century. Here are the addresses, go look them up. Good luck to you!"

We were not misled. Sheina has sent us to an odd couple worthy of a Broadway comedy.

One, a retired oven-maker, is shortish, a trifle stocky, and yearns to return to the traditional Jewish religious life of his youth. The other, a retired engineer, is tallish, slim, and a proud believer in communism. They argue constantly, using epithets, both Yiddish and Russian, that have helped make the reputation for expressiveness of both languages.

Still, they are best of friends, who could barely imagine living without each other. In fact, they do have quite a bit in common. They are two of the handful of Jews who remain here in Drisa. Pinye's wife Peshka died in 1993. Heersh's wife Fradda passed away in 1994. Both were left heartbroken and isolated, and in their grief — found each other. They can be seen having a good time (and squabbling) in every nook of town.

The "historical" difference between Pinye Sheiner, in his mid seventies, who yearns for Jewish traditions, and Heersh Revinzon, eightyish, who yearns for the reinstatement of classic Soviet communism, goes back to that same old Polish-Soviet border, that held from the early 1920s until the Soviets invaded eastern Poland in September 1939. Drisa, as Sheina had explained, was the last

Soviet town in these parts between the two world wars; the Dvina river marked the border with Poland.

Pinye was born in Mior to the south, in then Poland, where Jews enjoyed religious freedom; his Yiddish is full of Hebraic expressions from Jewish life. Heersh hails from Ashveya to the north, deeper in the Soviet sector; his Yiddish is heavily Russified. Two *Litvaks,* who would have grown up in one and the same civilization several years earlier, grew up in completely different societies by virtue of the split of the territory of traditional Jewish Lithuania among the new republics that arose with the advent of the First World War. Pinye grew up in religious town as did his forefathers and foremothers. Heersh is a child of the Soviet revolution, for whom God, prayers, synagogues and traditions are all opiate of the people.

Pinye's powerful childhood memories of Mior revolve around the family's trade for generations: repairing garments for peasants in the villages round about. His father Shmuel, mother Etka and the three children all learned to sew at an early age. Pinye is the only survivor, having joined the Red Army after the Soviet occupation of 1939. Pinye waxes sentimental thinking of the three synagogues in Mior, two hasidic and one misnagdic. The only visual trace of his entire family is a photograph that his parents stuck in the hands of a peasant as they were being led to the mass grave on July 2nd 1942. A Polish woman returned the picture to him. An enlargement on his wall is his most precious possession.

Heersh is less willing to talk about his murdered relatives for fear of making a misimpression that it was only Jews who suffered in the war. He acknowledges that Jews alone were subject to mass murder, but insists on talking about humanity, the inherent goodness of socialism, and the inherent evil of fascism. To change the subject, he calls in our driver (a Belorussian this time), angry that we left him in the car during the interview.

Both Pinye Sheiner and Heersh Revinzon came to Drisa right after the war, having been sent here by their respective Soviet collective enterprises, Pinye as master ovenmaker and Heersh as a chief engineer of a government "enterprise."

We take the two gentlemen to tea at the town's single government cafeteria, called "Restoran Drisa" in Russian and "Restaran Drisa" in Belorussian. It is a bit weird to the foreign eye to see huge signs with just one spelling difference (and it is only spelling, that first "o" is pronounced "a" in Russian every bit as much as in Belorussian, but it is important symbolically for the minority of Belorussian culture advocates here, and the bilingualism of signs, at least, is a Soviet legacy that survives). But our eye turns from the word for restaurant to its actual name.

Pinye explains: "They could change the name of the town to Verkhnedvinsk, but think how ridiculous it would be for this dump of a restaurant to be called Verkhnedvinsk, so they kept it *Drisa.*"

Having taken tea with us, the two pals, both decorated veterans of World War II, walk us around town. They start arguing before we manage to get anywhere. Pinye wants to show us the monument to Napoleon's sojourn here, but Heersh objects to showing the foreign visitors an edifice commemorating the bourgeois invader, who, he says, "*should* have had nothing to do with Drisa. Is this the Gubernia (province) of Paris, or what, ah?"

He has his own plan for us, and walks us toward the monument to socialist progress, but Pinye extends his arms outwards like a policeman gesturing that the road ahead is closed. "Look, these people don't want to be bothered with this communist rubbish. And by the way, partner, when your Soviets were in power, our guests would never even have been allowed on to the ferry! They would have had to spend the night in Slaboda!" (Slaboda is the hamlet across the Dvina where the ferry docks, the implication being that foreigners in Soviet times would not be allowed into a "border town" without special documents. Even now, there are strict limitations on who can stay in the town's hotel. The border with Latvia is not far.)

To break out of the cycle, we suggest starting our walkabout with the old Jewish cemetery. The "old old" one was dismantled by the Soviets long ago, but the "newer old" one still exists. In fact three burial grounds lie on the same site: this "newer old" cemetery (traditional Jewish stones of the 19th and 20th centuries up

to 1941), the "new" (Soviet style stones for Jews who died after the war and whose families chose the Jewish cemetery), and the mass grave, where the Jewish population of Drisa was shot and buried, in February 1942. In contrast to many other towns, there is scarcely a trace of vandalism here.

Pinye remembers only bits and pieces of the kaddish prayer for the dead. He asks me to say kaddish at the grave of his wife, Peshka.

Afterwards, I ask Heersh if I may do the same at the grave of his Fradda.

The old-time Soviet stalwart dismissively glides his arm through the air, but a tiny pearl-like tear seems to appear from nowhere just under his left eye. We all change the subject. Pinye makes an excuse to leave for a few moments.

Eye to eye with Heersh, I ask him if he will do me a favor and let me say kaddish at his wife's grave. He responds with an almighty Russian bear hug.

It turns out that he remembers almost as much of the hallowed prayer as his old-new pal, Pinye.

AMDUR

By trade, Elli Goldfand, a frail 79 year old, is a shoemaker who hails from a long line of shoemakers called Goldfand, here in Amdur, less than an hour's drive south of Grodna. But since his retirement, he has become an amateur beekeeper. With his ample collection of home-made beekeeping paraphernalia, laid out neatly in his big back garden, he produces fragrant beeswax and unusual tasting (but palatable) honey.

But his mind is not on shoes or on bees.

This man has had a serious kidney operation and does not expect to be around very long. He is focused on one thing and one thing only: that the 2,400 annihilated Jews of Amdur will be forgotten when he dies, and he tells us that he will share his proposal with us before we depart.

Amdur (am-DUR, now called Indura) happens to be one of those backwater towns that keeps cropping up in Jewish lore and history.

The Lubavitch hasidim are, of course, the great survivors of Lithuanian hasidism — those dynasties that arose up north, in Lithuania and Belorussia. But there was a time, over two centuries ago, "when Lubavitch was just Lubavitch," an obscure Belorussian village, and the challenge to the traditionalist Vilna-based Judaism of Lithuanian Jewry came from a hasidic rebbe here in Amdur. In fact, for a few years right up to his death in 1787, Chaim-Chaike of Amdur was the only hasidic rebbe in all Lithuania. His hasidic court in Amdur is considered to be a prime factor in the breakout of new hostilities between the two sides in 1781.

To his supporters (to this day), Chaim-Chaike was a profound thinker who developed the notion that a person must work at negating his or her ego. The more a person weakens the sense of being, the closer he or she becomes to the source, to God. And, one should not pray for enjoying the good life here in this world. To his enemies in the misnagdic camp, Chaim-Chaike

was a dangerous charlatan, who sat on a "throne" covered with goldpaper, and led his followers, his *hasidim,* in ecstatic over-the-top prayer rituals, and was one of the few in deep Lithuania who could attract a large following of young people to his "court."

He has remained an enigmatic figure even to modern scholars. It is enough to read the chapter on him in Joseph Weiss's *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford 1985) to glean a profound spiritual picture of a mystic thinker. Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch's treatment in his *Lithuanian Hasidism* (English version — London 1970) depicts a rowdy hasidic court of precisely the kind that aroused the ire of the Lithuanian rabbinate.

And, mention Amdur to any serious student of modern Yiddish literature, and you are likely to elicit the name of master Yiddish writer Chaim Grade (1910—1982). In his two volume epic novel, *Tzemach Atlas* (published in New York in 1968), Amdur is the scene of the book's most unforgettable scene. It is where the haunted young rabbi, Tzemach, feels compelled to visit, to beg forgiveness of the simple, small-town girl he was to marry, but didn't. He had annulled the engagement contract (the *tnóyim*), opting instead for a more sophisticated, big-town — and wealthier — bride. It wasn't long before Tzemach was torn by guilt over his own hypocrisy. He was, after all, a fanatic proponent of the controversial *múser* movement, which promoted an unattainable (some would say) standard of personal conduct. This movement, which takes its name from the Hebrew word *mussar* (morals, ethics, rebuke of another or oneself for faulty human behavior), was largely the creation of a great nineteenth century Lithuanian rabbinic scholar, Israel of Salant (1810—1883), known simply as *der Salanter* (the Salanter) in Yiddish.

In Grade's novel, Tzemach turns up at Amdur, only to discover that the dumped bride had taken ill and died after the bitter humiliation of the broken engagement. He heads right for the dead girl's house to beg forgiveness of her father, Falk Namyot.

> When Tzemach hears that his former fiancée was dead, he lay down in front of her house and pressed his face into

> the soft autumnal earth. [...] Falk Namyot emerged from his house with a thick walking stick under his arm, on his way to the afternoon service. Seeing that Tzemach was still lying in front of his door, Namyot stepped over him as if he were a carpet. Tzemach rose, his face and beard smeared with mud, and blocked Namyot's path.
>
> "Please forgive me," he said. Falk Namyot whipped the walking stick from under his arm and waved it over the head of the petitioner, who stood with arms slack, waiting for the death blow. But Namyot had concluded that it wouldn't be wise to kill a man, so he spat in his face and went to pray. [...]
>
> On his third day in Amdur, Tzemach was again lying in front of Falk Namyot's house; Namyot had bolted the door and wouldn't set foot outside. He merely looked out the window once in a while with an expression of satisfied vengeance on his long, wrinkled face. The townspeople watched the young rabbi rolling in the mud and thought they would go out of their minds. Neither kind words nor angry shouts could bring him to his feet.
>
> (from Curt Leviant's English translation of Chaim Grade's *Yeshiva,* Menorah Press, N.Y. 1979)

❊

Amdur is a village rich in Jewish history. Painful as it is for him to face, Elli Goldfand's own life is the last Jewish story of Amdur. "I was born here in 1919," he begins, sitting in his garden, between a stack of linden-tree cuttings and a barrel of buckwheat, his bees' two favorite foods. "My grandmother Etti had just died. But they couldn't call a boy Etti, so I became Elli. Before the war I rode around the surrounding villages and hamlets with horse and wagon, repairing the peasants' shoes. Amdur was poor but it was a happy place. It was a village of Jewish shoemakers, tailors, oven makers, carpenters and blacksmiths. Believe it or not, there were two real doctors."

Mr. Goldfand beckons us to follow him inside the house, where his wife, a Belorussian who fought with the partisans in the

nearby forest during the war, has prepared a meal. He dons a yarmulka which he obtained on a visit to the synagogue in Grodna several years ago. "It's better to eat with a yarmulka," he says, as he picks up the thread about Amdur.

"According to the local Christian legend, the name Indura, *their* name for Amdur, comes from the daughter of a man who went crazy after settling here."

Is there a Jewish legend?

"I was waiting for you to ask that! Yes, our tradition is that the town is named for En-Dor in the Bible. You remember of course, that King Saul went to the witch of En-Dor and got her to conjure up the spirit of the prophet Samuel. Well, you know, there was supposed to be a fanatic hasidic rebbe here hundreds of years ago. His followers were said to believe in sorcery. The rabbis in Grodna thought he was some kind of male-witch, and people started calling the place En-Dor, which eventually came to be Amdur. That at any rate is *our* tradition."

Elli's biblical reference is to the story of the Witch of En-Dor at I Samuel, 28: 5—25. His reference to the hasidic rebbe is of course to Chaim-Chaike, who managed to hold his own until his death in 1787. But without his charisma, hasidism here, in the depths of Jewish Lithuania, could not withstand the multipronged attack of the misnagdim. Amdur became a misnagdic town, in which only legends of Chaim-Chaike survived.

Elli suffers acute pain after his botched operation, but he cannot afford the medicine he needs, now sold at near-Western prices in nearby Grodna.

We proceed to walk around town, to fathom an Amdur that is no more. Mr. Goldfand remembers that "One of the two doctors used to always remind his patients that Freud says the mind is the only importance place. And in my mind, it will always be Amdur, not Indura."

We begin our walkabout in the town square. For all his poverty and lack of medicine, Mr. Goldfand insists that he does not expect support from the Jews of America. "But I hope you will tell them my one last wish: that they put up a little monument

to the Jews of Amdur, right here in the town square, next to the war memorials, not only at the mass gravesite far from the center of town. Promise me that when I am gone you will one day mention somewhere my dying wish, that the memorial to the town's Jews be right in the town center."

We carry on to the great synagogue of Amdur, known as *di alte shul* (the old synagogue). It stands desolate, a huge boarded-up apparition. Its front entrance is heavily overgrown. Three geese delight in a puddle but take a moment to stare at us. Still, the sanctity of the place seems stubbornly undiminished. The wind seems to whistle out an eerie holiday melody through gaps in the walls.

The last stop is the old Jewish cemetery at Amdur.

But there is something Mr. Goldfand wants to tell us before we get there.

"The Soviets took Amdur from the Poles in September 1939. I was drafted into the Soviet army in 1940. I was far away from here when the Germans came in June of 1941. I returned here after the war, in 1946. We had been told on the front about the murder of all the Jews. But like everyone else, I hoped to find *somebody*. But I found nobody. I was the only Jew in Amdur in 1946, and I am the only Jew in Amdur today. Nothing has changed since then."

Mr. Goldfand's parents, grandparents, three sisters and one brother were all shot. "But by some miracle," he says, "I found a treasure. A picture of my sister Freida. I had it enlarged. It hangs in the center of my house. It is the only trace of the family that I found after the war."

We are at the cemetery, and Mr. Goldfand continues his narrative.

"Well, the day I returned in 1946, I came here to say kaddish, and saw that local peasants were grazing their cows among the gravestones, as if it were just another field, as if there had never been any Jews here. I was still in uniform. I still had my army-issue rifle. Overcome with anger, I shot the three cows in my line of sight. The police arrested me. They fined me and let me go. To tell

you the truth, they respected what I had done, although they had to follow the law."

Shooting the three cows did not, however, deter local peasants from continuing to graze their cattle at the old Jewish cemetery.

"Despite my protests, they continued. Until 1948. Yes, it's hard to believe that it was some fifty years ago. What happened in 1948? There was a violent thunderstorm, the most ferocious that anyone could remember. Twelve cows were struck dead by lightning, right over there," he recalls, pointing to a ridge near the center of the cemetery.

"But no other cow was struck in all of Amdur," he says, and, after a brief pause, comes to the stark ending of the last Jewish story of Amdur.

"The peasants took the death of the twelve cows as a sign from God. The communists were in power, of course, but the peasants never believed in any of that. Let me tell you the truth. We observed traditions in our family, but I was no great believer.

"But when the twelve cows were struck I knew there was a God. Not a great God. A very little God. A great God would have saved the Jews of Amdur. All God could do, after it was all over and done with, was strike twelve cows who were defiling our cemetery. But after that, I was sure at least that he exists."

And that is the last Jewish story of Amdur.

DISNA

We first came here, unexpectedly, back in 1993. We were heading for the city of Polotsk. I had always wanted to see Polotsk (PUH-lutsk) because in the parts my people came from, around Michaleshik, one would say "from Polotsk" to mean "from very far away." But looking at the map nowadays, it didn't seem all that far. It seemed just right for an expedition.

But something happened on the way to Polotsk.

En route we caught sight of a sign that read: DISNA. An arrow pointed leftward, down an old country road. Like children who had just chanced upon the Yellow Brick Road to Oz, we decided that Polotsk would wait until some other time. What Polotsk and why Polotsk, when we've hit upon Disna!

The further down the road, the more the peeling Soviet asphalt gives way to resplendent old cobble stones of every hue in the rainbow.

Disna is a God forsaken village set on the plateau where the little Disna River flows into the mighty Dvina (which eventually crosses the Latvian border and makes for Riga).

But to readers of Yiddish literature, Disna (DIS-neh in Yiddish) is not obscure at all (though very few of these readers have the vaguest idea where on earth it is). That is because the great Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak (1896—1940) decided at some point that he was going to produce a Yiddish poetic rejoinder — no more and no less — to Lord Byron. In "reply" to Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* the young Yiddish poet came out with his *Disner Child Harold* (Child Harold of Disna).

Byron's autobiographical poem, published in 1812, traced the young poet's sojourns in the heart of Europe and established his reputation back home in Britain.

Kulbak's pilgrimage made for an even starker contrast. He was a boy from Smargon, a far cry from the Harrow and Trinity College Cambridge of Byron's youth. Kulbak set off for Berlin in 1920 and joined up with other poets and literary types. He later explored the explosive crash-of-cultures in *Child Harold of Disna,* one of the classic Yiddish poems of the twentieth century.

Some years ago, a famous Oxford professor of German, who had also done excellent work in the field of Yiddish, called me into his rooms to help with a difficult word. He was able to find in dictionaries every word in the poems of Kulbak except for "Disner" which had given him sleepless nights. I proudly explained that it's the Yiddish uninflecting adjective form of a town "Disna" (not that I had any notion then, in the mid 1980s, of where precisely it might be, nor did it ever occur to me that one day there'd be no Soviet Union, and one of the many places I'd be able to see would be the real Disna).

We touched down in Disna (now officially Dzisna), with a rush of exhilaration, and emerged from the car, as usual, in the center of town. For centuries, the town square doubled as the market place, in the Russian Empire up until World War I, and then under Polish rule in the interwar years. When the Soviets took over, they didn't stop at dismantling the old market; they "standardized" all the old town squares with mini-parks featuring statues of Lenin and other Soviet heroes.

We bide our time, waiting for someone who looks both old and sympathetic. Eventually, an elderly woman smiles broadly at us. We ask her if there are any Jews left in town. The cheerful Belorussian cries out "Oo-ah! Foreigners in Disna!" and answers our question with an even broader smile:

"Da! Sverdlov! Polotskaya" and following her directions, we cross the old bridge and find ourselves in Polotsk Street (*Pólotsker gas* to Jews before the war), a wide unpaved road with sloping wooden houses on one side, and open flatlands stretching to the

horizon on the other. The road is of sand, and the slightest breeze blows toy tornado twisters high up in the air.

At no. 30, a man in the huge garden is digging up his potatoes, clutching on to the wooden plow pulled by a horse. A woman is chasing the chickens by the side of the house with the traditional "plyu-plyu-plyu!" Both, dressed in raggedy torn clothing, look every bit like the other Belorussian peasants in Polotsk Street.

On this expedition, and several others, our usual troika was joined by a young Belorussian scholar from Minsk, Vital Zajka, a Christian who has mastered Yiddish and Hebrew (today he is a research associate at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York).

Vital remarks, "But they look just like Belarusian peasants! Do you think they are really Jews? Do they really speak Yiddish?"

They were and they did.

They are the last Jews in town. The husband, Mendel, a house painter by trade, was born in a nearby town, Glubok. But Shifra, his wife, was born right here in the old family house in Disna. Her forefathers on both sides had lived here for hundreds of years. *Rikhtike Disner,* she says with pride — true Disnaens. She is not some *aráyngeforene*, someone whose parents or grandparents "drove into town." In shtetl society, a family remained in the category of newcomers for some generations, so rooted was its Jewish society and concepts of oldtimerliness.

We call out to them in Yiddish. Mendel drops his plow, shouting a stern *bbbrrrrr* which is horse-language in these parts for "Stop!" Naturally, the horse understands horse-language, and he duly stops. Shifra (SHIF-reh) lets the chickens run wild. Both come running and tell us it is the first time since the war that Yiddish speaking people had come looking for them. They hug and kiss us as if we were friendly ghosts from once-upon-a-time land.

They speak a rich Lithuanian Yiddish, his from nearby Glubok, hers the local Disna variety. Mendel is wearing patched black trousers, a torn white shirt, and a wide-visored cap, whose

rounded top has gone a bit wonky. Shifra is covered in many layers of colorful garments. We follow them into the house, through the *firres*, as the earthen-floored ante-room of the traditional village hut is known in Yiddish (the word comes from *fir-hoyz*, or "ante-house," "ante-room"). Round about are clusters of jars — jams, pickled onions and cucumbers, and assorted potions. Ropes, pots, buckets and sieves hang from the crossbeams. A ladder with clothing flung over the steps seems to lead up into a loft, or maybe even up to the heavens of Kulbak in Disna.

Shifra rushes to put on a beige sweater with smart vertical green stripes, elegantly covering her many layers of clothing. The sweater was a gift from their daughter who had moved to Latvia.

We cross through the kitchen and sit down in the sitting room. The huge stone oven, smack in the middle of the house, heats all four rooms around it. Shifra serves coffee mixed with chicory. As she passes over the *kubik*, or mug, she notices a circle of flies by the rim, and removes them with a swift angry swoop of her blackened forefinger, hurling them down toward the floorboards. We discreetly pour the mixture down into the thankfully ample gaps between the floorboards in our part of the room. Vital (who'd spent a year studying with me at Oxford) and I start joking about how our boss's wife elegant wife in Oxford might react to such a "cuppa" . . .

Mendel apologizes for leaving us but he must finish digging up the potatoes. There was an unusual September frost the night before. One more of those, he explains, and that's the end of his potatoes for the winter. He walks out toward the ante-room and the sand-blown garden, with a slow, mildly lopsided walk, frequently straightening the visor of his cap to little avail, for the visor and the cap are themselves no longer in line.

Shifra starts telling us all about the Disna of old. She remembers everything about the religious and the anti-religious Disnaens, the sane and the insane, the hasidim and the misnagdim. She bursts into tears recalling how her mother, Vichna (VEECH-neh) used to bake the traditional Belorussian Jewish *leyter* ("ladder") before Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and shows us her mother's clay baking pot. The "ladder" was a kind of

sugared challah bread, crafted in the shape of a ladder with three steps, to symbolize the cherished hope that the most sacred prayers will make their way straight up to Heaven. It was eaten in Disna when the Yom Kippur fast ended (in contrast to some surrounding villages, the *leyter* was eaten before the fast).

Shifra sizes us all up, and takes a keen interest in Vital as a possible match for her divorced daughter. Vital shoots back in perfect Yiddish: "But surely you don't want your daughter to marry a *sheygetz*!" (using a colloquial Yiddish term for "non-Jewish young man"). Shifra, who cannot imagine a young non-Jew speaking such Yiddish in the 1990s, delights even more in her prospective son-in-law: "Ha-ha-ha, a sheygetz! Some sheygetz! What a sharp sense of humor you have! My daughter in Latvia, she lives in Daugavpils, she will love it!" Vital gives up explaining any further and smiles, happy that his presence is bringing this woman some cheer.

At nightfall, Mendel comes back, and reports to Shifra that he has returned the horse and plow to the neighbor who owns them. It is getting chilly. He opens one of the cast-iron doors on the stone oven and ignites the kindling wood. The sweet smell of fresh forest timber escapes through the gaps around the little door.

In view of Shifra's wealth of folklore and stories, we lay camp in Disna for a few days. The hotel is one of the worst we'd ever been in, so if you're heading for Disna, don't stay in its hotel. Details spared.

The last night, Ziske, our redoubtable scout who loves to throw spanners in the works, asks if Mendel and Shifra ever plan to emigrate. The question exposes a fault line in what had seemed to be an idyllic marriage. Mendel speaks of wanting to die in the Jewish homeland, and proceeds to tell the standard joke about the Israeli immigrant absorption official who asks an elderly immigrant arriving at Ben Gurion Airport: "Why are you moving to Israel?" The Jew replies, "Because I want to die in a Jewish country." The official replies: "Nu??"

But this humor falls flat in front of his wife, and he hastens to assure us all that he wants in fact to *live* his last years in a Jewish country. Shifra turns white with anger, takes a match and, with

another swift angry swoop of her blackened forefinger, ignites an old kerosene fueled lantern. She beckons us to follow her into the woods behind their garden.

We follow.

There is no discernible wind to be felt in the blunt Belorussian evening chill, but the flame in the lamp keeps changing direction, as if by its own whim. Less than ten minutes later, we stand by a clearing where a bright moon illuminates a fenced-in area with a stone monument. It is the mass murder site, where the 3,800 Jews of Disna, toddlers and oldsters, healthy and lame, were all shot into a big pit by the Nazis on June 14, 1942. Seventeen Jewish craftsmen, whose skills the Germans needed a bit longer, were spared until January 22, 1943, when they too were added to the pit.

Among the Jews who were shot and buried (usually still breathing) at the site, were Shifra's parents and four brothers. She was closest to her mother, Vichna, and could never forgive herself for fleeing to Russia when the Germans invaded. We console her with the standard argument, that there was just no way of knowing (or even imagining) that the invaders would slaughter an entire civilian population. She herself recalls that the older Jews of Disna advised people to stay. Just as elsewhere, they remembered the German Army during World War I as the most civilized of all.

We recite kaddish, and return to the house in silence. Inside, Shifra, whose eyes seem to have grown larger, rounder and sharper, picks up where the conversation had left off.

"Ah! You think I would leave my mother in that pit and move away?! What kind of person to you think I am? I visit her grave at the pit, no knowing exactly in what part she lies, though I have my feelings, every single day of my life, and when I die, I too will be buried there, with her, with my father, and with all the Jews of Disna. Nobody is taking me away from them. He wants to move to Israel, Mendel, let him move then! He can go!"

Mendel sits tight. He is supremely conscious of his manly composure. But a single tear finds its way down his cheek.

Next morning, we retrace our steps through the wood behind the house to see the mass grave by daylight. We carry on to the old Jewish cemetery on a hill by the edge of town. Hundreds of gravestones, like aging spirits, lean and lurch, in the midst of thickets unvisited for half a century. They take on the appearance of a village somewhere in another world.

But at the foot of the hill a bulldozer is moving earth and stones. We confront the driver. He explains that the headstones are going to be used in ballast for new roads. "I'm am atheist and let me tell you — when you're dead, you're dead!"

Three years later, in September 1996, we returned to 30 Polotsk Street in Disna, to see how Mendel and Shifra are doing. The core team of Pioter, Ziske and Dovid are there. Vital was by now in America but we had with us a professional photographer from Britain.

On the way, we stopped in Glubok (Hlybokae) to look up Yankel Pelkin, a shoemaker. We had been told that he is a "local encyclopedia" about Jewish Glubok before the war, and he certainly lives up to his reputation. Of the few remaining Jews in Glubok, he is the only native of the town. And in all of what was once the Province of Vilna (*Vilner gubernye*), he is the last shtetl shoemaker. But that is another story.

Yankel Pelkin was in the middle of telling us all about Glubok, when he suddenly interrupted himself to ask where we would be heading next.

"Disna!"

"to Sverdlov?"

"Yes."

"You heard what happened?"

"No, what happened?"

We bade him a speedy farewell and rushed to Disna, no longer Kulbak's Disna but our Disna with its own very tragic plot. We crossed the old bridge to find that Polotsk Street is now asphalted. We can't help wondering whether pieces of the old Jewish cemetery might not have been used in the ballast. But the thoughts of the stones faded rapidly in the wake of the tale of the last Children of Disna.

Mendel confirms what we had heard in Glubok. In September 1994, a year after our first visit, the couple decided to emigrate. Or so Mendel thought. He took the bus to Mior (Miory), the county seat, to pick up the first documents in the lengthy bureaucratic process of emigration (there's a lot of bureaucracy entailed in legal emigration, necessary for anyone who has family left behind or who may want to return to visit, but unlike Soviet times, people *can* legally emigrate).

He returned home to Disna to find the door open but no Shifra. That had never happened before. She always locked the door when she went out, being afraid of ghosts and goblins more than any local thieves or miscreants.

Mendel walked in, and sat down in the kitchen, restless and worried. He got up to walk out again. Passing through the large, dark *firres* — the anteroom — he yelled out in horror when he saw Shifra's limp body hanging from a rope that had been tied around one of the crossbeams. She left a note asking to be buried near her mother, at the mass grave site. The top part of the rope, tied around the crossbeam, is still there.

We accompany Mendel to the mass murder site, and say *kaddish* twice, once for the Jews of Disna, and once for Shifra Greniman Sverdlov. A mound of sand marks her grave. Mendel begins to weep. If only he hadn't gone to Mior to enquire about emigration, his Shifra would still be with him.

"But I'm crying," he adds defiantly, "because I can't afford the hundred dollars for a proper Jewish gravestone."

After the suicide, Mendel's daughter Vichna (named after Shifra's mother), returned to Disna from Daugavpils, (one-time Dvinsk) in Latvia. The present-day Vichna is proud that she never

changed her somewhat quaint sounding Yiddish name (once a popular Yiddish name in these parts, and one that just went out of fashion). She returned to Disna with her own teen-age daughter Lyena. Vichna suffers from seizures. The local doctor thinks that Lyena's persistent cough may indicate tuberculosis, but he is not entirely sure. The women are desperate to emigrate. For some time, Mendel wanted to stay, to be buried near his Shifra. But now they have all decided to emigrate, and we wish them godspeed.

We stop by the old Jewish cemetery on our way out of town. It has largely disappeared in the time since we had last been in Disna, but several stones that were mostly underground were spared. One old gravestone still stands erect. It seems to scream out: "Look, I defied the bulldozer!"

As we prepare to bid a final farewell to Disna, our thoughts are fixed on Shifra, who had to hang herself, as she saw it, to be sure she would lie by her mother's side until the end of days. She is verily Hitler's last victim in Disna.

In the year 2000, we return to Disna, this time with Lithuanian filmmaker Saulius Berzhinis and Stanford Yiddish scholar Amelia Glaser. The house is all locked up. Friendly neighbors tell us that Mendel, Vichna Lyena, all three generations, moved to Israel to start a new life, but that they didn't sell the house or its contents. They just locked everything up and left the key with a trusted neighbor, whom Mendel told "I will come back to visit."

We visit Shifra's grave. The family had an engraved tin plaque nailed to a hewn stone.

The place is too sad for us to stay much longer, but before bidding farewell forever to Disna, we decide to have a look inside the building that was once the great synagogue of Disna. From out outside, it is still obvious that it was built as a traditional synagogue. We are told that visitors are not allowed in.

Berzhinis, one of Lithuania's most daring documentary film makers, never takes no for an answer. One way or another he gets us in. The synagogue has become a massive sweatshop. Hundreds of women are sewing coats that say:

LONDON FOG

made in England

SMOLOVITCH

Every now and again, the town of Smolovitch (SMUH-luh-vitch), northeast of Minsk, is confused with Smilovitch (SMEE-luh-vitch), which is southeast of Minsk.

To avoid getting mixed up, just remember that Smolovitch is on the road to Borisov. Smilovitch, on the other hand, is on the track to Babruisk. And then, you can't go wrong.

There is another reason for the confusion. Smilovitch (now Smilavitchy) is world famous. It was the hometown of the renowned expressionist painter Chaim Soutine (1893—1943).

But what about Smolovitch (now Smalyavitchy)? A number of Belorussian Jews tell us that the town's name (which some of them pronounce "Smoylevitch") comes from "Smoyel," which is pretty deep Belorussian Yiddish for the usual Yiddish (and Hebrew) "Shmuel" (Samuel).

We didn't find Smolovitch in the usual way, crisscrossing the countryside and asking in town squares if any Jews are to be found. We got here on a hot tip.

We were in a meeting with Heersh Reles, the last Yiddish writer in Belarus, at the Yiddish Culture Club in Minsk. A young woman, in a neat 1950s style suit and very thickly framed spectacles, seemed to appear from nowhere. She was introduced as journalist Anna Plavnik. Straight away she asked if we knew who her grandfather was.

"Uh, no, sorry, umm, who was your grandfather?"

He was Zmitrok Biadula (1886—1941), one of the classic authors of modern Belorussian literature. Nevertheless, his real name was Shmuel-Nochem Plavnik, a native of Posotsk, in the province of Minsk.

He started out as a Yiddish and Hebrew writer noted for his portrayals of lumberjacks and rural life, and went on to translate some of the Yiddish classics into the Belorussian (Belarusian) language. He co-authored a Yiddish-Belorussian pocket dictionary that came out in Minsk in 1932. If you find a copy in your attic, take it straight to Sotheby's. It is one of the rarest modern-era Yiddish books.

We asked Ms. Plavnik if Biadula had any surviving relatives who still spoke Yiddish, "Sure," she answered with a broad smile, "my cousin Shleime Freiman in Smolovitch, about a half hour drive from here. He turned a hundred last April."

We were out of there before you could say Zmitrok Biadula.

"Yes, I turned a hundred in April. So what's the big deal?" asks the elegant mustached man at the door. One of my grandfathers lived until 113. Hey, I'll bet people told you that the name of our town, Smolovitch, comes from the name Shmuel."

"*A nekhtiker tog*!" he pronounces with relish, invoking one of the many Yiddish phrases for "What nonsense!" Yiddish linguists continue to debate whether its literal derivation is "yesterday's day" or "a day that is night" but that debate is for another day.

"Well, if you want to know the truth, it comes from *smólle,* the Yiddish word for 'tar.'

"This was the tar making capital of all *Minsker gubernye*. And damn it," he adds with a brotherly smile and half a wink, "the name of the place is Smolovitch, *not* Smilovitch!"

Shleime was drafted into the army of Czar Nicholas (Nikolai) II before World War I. "I paraded past the Czar on two occasions, I remember him well. By the way, under the czar, they were very understanding about Jewish soldiers on Passover, and let us go eat at the *péysakhdiker tish* (Passover table) prepared by Jewish women in the nearest town. When it became the Soviet army, that came to an end.

"I built this house in 1919. The street was known as Suderik, but now it's Sovetskaya.

"Don't know much about that famous Chaim Soutine fellow from Smilovitch, except that one of his close relatives, Dober Soutine, also from Smilovitch, moved here long before I was born and built up all kinds of businesses and especially tar businesses. My father — we were all wagoners, *balagóles* — did a lot of work for old Soutine, *our* Soutine that is. I was twelve when old Dober Soutine died. And what a funeral it was. I don't think the czars had such a funeral."

Shleime recalls with a wistful smile the day during World War I when he got up a little late, went to the toilet, and saw the czar's portrait hanging upside down in the outhouse. He ran out screaming to his mates "We'll all be shot for a prank like this." Shleime picks up the thread:

"You overslept, Freiman! There was a revolution! The czar is out! We are all comrades now!"

Shleime is interrupted by his wife's arrival. She is Peshka Levitan, who like her husband, comes from a long line of Smolovitcheans. She is at once shocked and thrilled to see foreign visitors. "First time it happened! You came specially to hear our stories? Well, have I got stories for you!"

She picked up that we had been talking about old Dober Soutine. At a mere 85, she is too young to remember the man himself, but she has known his gravestone all her life. "It's not a gravestone, it's one of the pyramids of Egypt from the Passover Hagodah! My Shleime was there when the widow put it up. She spent a fortune to erect the largest granite monument ever seen in all *Minsker gubernye.*

"When the Germans came in 1941, they wanted to use the stone for their own purposes and sent two bulldozers to dig it up. They worked all day and couldn't budge it. It's almost as if Soutine's widow knew what would happen and wanted to be sure that when all is said and done, her Dober's stone would stand proud and tall. And it does. But when the Germans couldn't move it, they "took revenge on the *vantsn"* (bedbugs), as the Yiddish

saying goes, by shooting it full of bullet holes. Still, you'll be able to read the long complicated inscription in Hebrew on the front. It has writing on all four sides. Come let's go."

On the way to the cemetery, we pass one of the Holocaust era mass grave sites that is being covered over by a new factory, without the slightest mention of the site's grisly history. Peshka says "*S'et klekn*" (that will suffice), meaning — enough on that topic.

We arrive at the old cemetery. A little forest has grown up among the stones, but there has been far less vandalism here than is usual in these parts. Peshka explains why.

"The Soviet cemetery is right next to it. And when they ran out of room, they made a new section on the other side of the *beséylem* (Jewish cemetery). "So you see, the old Jewish cemetery is sandwiched between the two halves of the Soviet graveyard."

This cemetery tells a detailed story of Jewish culture in the USSR. Gravestones from the early and mid 1920s still bear all the traditionally sacred Hebrew inscriptions of pre-revolutionary stones. From the late 1920s onward, the inscriptions begin to decline, both graphically and in the quality of the Hebrew. From the late 30s, Soviet style inscriptions — in Russian or Soviet Yiddish — start to appear. This is one cemetery that should go into a book of photos (and become the focus of a thesis on how a surviving cemetery can tell the ins and outs of a century of turbulent cultural history).

We finally come to the Soutine monument. On its front is the name "Dober Soutine" in large letters. "Dober" is an old Yiddish rendition of "Dov-Ber." It is followed by a long Hebrew poem in the classic tradition. The first letters of each line, read downward, form an acrostic which reads: "Dov-Ber ben Menachem-Nochem Soutine zal" (Dov-Ber son of Menachem-Nokhem Soutine, of blessed memory). On its right, his place and date of birth: Smilovitch, 15 Adar 5589 (= 20 March 1829). To the left, details of his death (Smolovitch, 16 Adar 1———9). The Hebrew numbers in the middle have been shot out by bullets, but Shleime fills in the blanks for us. He was, after all, at the funeral, on March 10, 1909!

We learn in passing, that the local family name was pronounced SU-tin, obviously changed by the artist to sou-TINE in Paris, much the way a certain Mr. Segal became cha-GALL. That seems to be what happens to Litvak artists who move to Paris.

We return to Shleime and Peshka's house, where Peshka tells us her life story. It is more than a little reminiscent of Sheina Beilin's back up in Drisa to the north. The similarities are enhanced by both women having been born and have lived right up to the war in towns on the Soviet side of the interwar border.

Peshka was an outstanding pupil in the Soviet Yiddish school here, and her one ambition was to become a Yiddish teacher. When she graduated, she went on to the Yiddish Technical Institute (*der yidisher tekhnikum*) in Minsk. Three years later she became the equivalent of a "student teacher" in the Yiddish school in Krupka, not far from Borisov. She returned here in the late 1930s, only to find that the government had converted her beloved school from Yiddish to Belorussian. All the Yiddish schools in the region were closed. "We were scared to death. We thought they might ship us away altogether if we asked any questions. Stalin was not someone to start a debate with, now!"

She was in Borisov when the first German bombs fell in June 1941, and managed to flee eastward on the last train.

When she returned after the war, she discovered that all the Jews of Smolovitch has been shot. Here too there was a shortage of Russian teachers. And her fate was the same as our Yiddish Teachers' college graduate up in Drisa. "Instead of sending me off to do a new degree they asked me to hand in my Yiddish Teachers' Diploma. In return, they gave me a Russian teaching diploma, and I taught here in the local Russian school right up to my retirement. You are the first person I've told that I actually earned a Yiddish degree, not a Russian one."

Peshka and Shleime both lost their first partners in the Holocaust. They were among the handful of flight-survivors to return to Smolovitch after the war and got married to each other. They moved into his old house, which the Germans had used during the war. The German police stationed there stole

everything except the huge magnificent buffet that was given to Shleime upon his first marriage in 1919. "I'll never forget the day it came on the wagon from Minsk. It's like old Soutine's grave. The Germans couldn't budge the thing, and there it stands, exactly where it has been since 1919."

The couple argue indefatigably.

About God.

Peshka is a religious God fearing woman who says the blessings before eating, and who frequents the cemetery where she speaks long monologues to her mother and her grandmother, among others. She often has conversations with God, asking for this or that kindness. This is quite rare for people who grew up on the Soviet side of the old Polish-Soviet border. For some years, we had stuck to the western, Polish side of that erstwhile border, thinking that elderly Jews would remember far more of traditional Jewish life. While that is often true, we learned that it is far from infallible. But then again, Peshka was born in 1912, and her earliest years were pre-Soviet and in the early years of the new state, before the anti-religious apparatus (and a fully developed alternative education) was truly up and running. We also saw yet again how things changed at different paces and at different times depending on the local authorities of a specific place. Peshka's pre-Soviet traditional religious culture runs deep through ever vein in her body.

Shleime, a devout socialist, makes fun of her all the time.

In one of their arguments the hundred year old Marxist says that modern science has overtaken all the voodoo of religion. Peshka shoots back that it's all from God.

Finally, she, the obvious boss around here, notes with relish that after many years of obstinacy, Shleime now shares in eating the traditional Jewish Passover food, matzah. That shuts him up.

Shleime's highlight of the day is the long and intricate ceremony of lighting the old cast iron fireplace set into the tiled Russian stove. Peshka's is reading from the Torah.

Peshka used to enjoy films, but no more. "The old films were wonderful. Now everything is sex-shmex!"

Peshka talks a lot about her father, who was a coppersmith. "He too made a living from Soutine's business. He used to make huge vats for the tar. The whole town made a living from Soutine, one way or another."

"He had golden hands, and he could make anything with his hands."

Though the topic is Peshka's late father, not God, Shleime cannot resist a little dig.

"I have one question. Could he make a fig?"

Peshka takes out a lock and key he made, and a copper pitcher. They were all that she found upon returning from Russia after the war.

"Please take this little pitcher with you. When we are gone, somebody, somewhere, will maybe know that Sheyel-Yankev Levitan, coppersmith of Smolovitch — Smolovitch, not Smilovitch! — made it with his own hands. And maybe they will remember that one upon a time there was a Smolovitch on God's earth."

KABIK

Polotsk, the northernmost city in Belarus, was known for centuries in local Yiddish folklore as "the happy city with the sad Chanukah."

Chanukah (or Hanukah) is an eight-day Jewish holiday that starts on the 25th day of the Jewish month Kislev, often coinciding with mid or late December. It is a family holiday of gift giving, an eight-candle menorah, and traditional games, foods and songs. One of the happiest Jewish holidays, it was initiated in 164 BC when Judah the Maccabee restored the temple at Jerusalem.

But Jews in Eastern Europe had a long memory for their own "history within the history" as well. In Polotsk, it was on the first day of Chanukah 1563 that Ivan the Terrible killed all the city's Jews who would not be baptized. They were drowned in the Dvina, the mighty river we had met up at Drisa (Verkhnedvinsk), which heads northwest, making for the Gulf of Riga. Like Drisa, Polotsk was on the Soviet side of the interwar Polish-Soviet border. The Soviet regime notwithstanding, many Jews here said special local memorial prayers on Chanukah, right up to the Holocaust. In December 1941, the eight thousand Jews remaining in the city were herded into a brick factory, and shot.

To modern Jewish historians, the city is best known for the early Hasidic master, Yisroel Polotsker (Israel ben Peretz), who died around 1785; and equally, for Pinches the Magid ("traveling preacher") of Polotsk, who moved to Vilna and expounded on the educational theories of the Gaon of Vilna, the leading anti-Hasidic master. Polotsk thus became an early and well known battle ground in the war between the misnagdim of Lithuania and those in historic eastern Lithuania who developed that special brand of Lithuanian Hasidism.

The city of Polotsk even made a controversial contribution to British Jewry. Shleime Yontef (1761—1838) left the town for

London in 1799, relaunched himself as Mr. Salomon Bennett, and started publishing virulent attacks against the chief rabbi. British chief rabbis have had a rotten time of it ever since.

But to the Jews here, this was really a city plus a shtetl. The "main part" was called "Polotsk" (much as Brooklynites, say, refer to Manhattan as "New York"). The poor shtetl across the Dvina was called Kabik (KA-bick), and its residents *Kabaker* (ka-BA-kerr — "Kabakers"). Today Kabik is called "Za-Dvinye" — across the Dvina). It was (and is) in the Province of Vitebsk.

Jewish religious belief and practice survived in Kabik much more than in most places in the Soviet Union.

On our first visit there, after the "little detour to Disna," in 1993, we found Deyv-Ber Prusovsky who was in his middle nineties, and, despite his apparent vigor, was to live only a little longer. He told us that the Jews of old, with a touch of typically multi-layered Yiddish humor, referred to Kabik as *Mey-éyver lanóhor* ("on the other side of the river"), a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Biblical term which usually signifies "across the river Jordan." It can refer to Abraham's origin in Ur of the Chaldees and likewise to the place to which idol-worshiping Israelites would one day be exiled. After all, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite did warn the wife of evil King Jeroboam (at 1 Kings 14:15), that God would "uproot Israel from this good land which he gave to their fathers, and will scatter them Beyond the River" (*Mey-eyver lanóhor*). The bittersweet humor is that the heart of Polotsk across the river, and especially its city center known as *Vitebsker Rogatke,* was home to the well-to-do. Kabik, by contrast, was the home of the poorest of the poor, hence the (half) jocular self-identification with Ahija's curse. . .

Prusovsky was the last who was able to tell about the pre-revolutionary Jewish life of Kabik in precise detail. He remembered that every Jew in the area was identifiable by his or her clothing, straight away, as belonging to the *shtotike* (city folk, from central Polotsk) or *Kabaker* (Kabakers, from across the river). Kabik had three prayerhouses. Prusovsky is from an old Lithuanian Chasidic (Lubavitch) family, and therefore identified them as "one misnagdic and two Jewish prayerhouses" (*eyn misnagdisher un tsvey yidishe botey-midroshim*). He went on for hours

about the two competing rabbis of Kabik, *der Dalhiner rov* (rabbi from Dalhinov, to the south) and *der Zameter dayen* (the judge from Samogitia, Yiddish *Zamet*, to the far west of Lithuania, by the Baltic Sea). And like every real shtetl Jew, he is not embarrassed in the least to confirm that his shtetl had its lunatics. The best known of Kabik, he tells us, were *Hille der meshugener* and *Zorekh der meshugener* (Hillel the lunatic and Zorach the lunatic).

Prusovsky's prized possession was an old Torah scroll from the province of Vilna, in perfect condition. In 1996, we found his widow, Chava guarding it with her life. It was, as before, perched on top of a bookcase wrapped in newspapers as a disguise. In 2000, both Prusovskys were gone, and the Torah was in the house of their daughter and Russian son-in-law who knew it to be valuable, but hadn't the vaguest idea how to realize its value in Belarus. We could not advise them on that one.

We are directed to the doyenne of Jewish Kabik.

"I am the last of the Kabakers," proclaims bedridden Sorra-Riva Lifschitz, who is in her middle nineties, and hails from an old Polotsk family that converted to Christianity to escape Ivan's Edict. They returned to Judaism shortly after the tyrant's death. She hails, so to speak, from sixteenth century Litvak marranos (the term "marrano" is most frequently used to refer to the Spanish Inquisition's converts who continued to practice Judaism secretly).

Her two unmarried daughters, Freida and Sheina, are no youngsters themselves. Be forewarned against asking their ages should you find yourself in these parts. They cherish their mother and watch over her day and night. They cry at the prospect of one day having to live without her, and are in panic over the potential effect of the melanoma on her nose. There is no money to pay for a proper surgeon to remove it, and they wonder aloud whether it would be a good idea to send a ninety-something for surgery in any case.

We ask Sorra-Riva about her paralysis.

"I've believed in God and the Jewish faith all my life, but my brother, Yisroel-Chaim, whom I loved very much, believed every bit as much in communism. He wanted to be cremated. When he died in 1988, they brought his ashes to the house in an urn. I instantly became paralyzed from the horror and cannot walk since. But as you see, my two wonderful daughters, bless them, look after me."

Sorra-Riva, her late husband Avrom-Zalmen and their three daughters saved themselves by running away, on June 28th, 1941, from the German invaders who had just entered town. They fled first to a nearby hamlet, where a Christian family hid them, and then started on the long trek eastward. "By foot, on horseback, wagon, train, you name it. We finally reached Malmizh, between Kazan and Izhevsk, at the far end of the earth. When the war ended, we came right back here to the family house in Polotsk. Like all the other houses on the street, it was occupied by gentiles who were sure that we were all dead. When they saw us coming, they ran like from a fire. As far as I know, *they* might have ended up between Kazan and Izhevsk!"

The highlight of her childhood is a vivid memory. "When I came of age, my poor parents saved up to give me the treat of my life. They sent me to Vilna with the local wagoner — it took a week each way — with just enough money to choose my very own women's prayerbook for the holidays, with a Yiddish translation on each page. It had a red velvet cover with a lock and key, and was the most beautiful thing I ever owned. I will never forgive myself for leaving it behind when we fled to Russia in 1941. May God forgive me."

Sorra-Riva and her daughters have enough to eat and heat the house in the winter. "But before I die I would like five things. White Sabbath candles. Old fashioned kosher soup. A brand new pot. A real Jewish calendar. And most of all, a new prayerbook with a red velvet cover."

An article in the New York *Forward* brought her all five things. But of the red velvet covered prayerbook, she received two. When we last saw her, a few months before her death she commanded her daughters: "This one," pointing to the more

modest of the two, "you shall bury with me," and the other one you shall keep to end of your days," her Yiddish to the end laced with the special *ivri-taytsh* language of classic Yiddish prayerbook translations.

Sorra-Riva died on the 23rd of December 1998, four days before her one hundredth birthday.

Little beknown to our little team, the death of the last of the "oldtimers" (defined in our work as those who predate the First World War) signaled not the end of our adventures in Kabik, but rather, a transition to a new phase.

Walking about in a sandstorm on one of the unpaved streets of Kabik, we are stopped by Dina Itkina, a smiling, elegant woman in her early sixties. She appears in front of us, as if dropped from the heavens, and offers to "tell us interesting things."

But first, she wants to share some more general views.

"Jewish people are brilliant and goodhearted, but a little mad," she begins. Dina teaches Russian and Belorussian literature to prison inmates who have been convicted of violent crimes. "So you see," she quips with a broad smile, radiant with different hues of metal, "I too am a little mad!"

"In your fancy, literary Yiddish of Vilna," she continues, *mishpókhe* may mean any old family, but here in Polotsk, it refers only to distant family members. Your nuclear family is your *gezínd.* Like lots of people, we were a poor *gezind* whose rich *mishpokhe* couldn't care less."

The talk turns to her childhood, and she looks us in the eye:

"I bet you guys never heard about *Stalin's rabónim* (Stalin's rabbis)!"

No. So who were Stalin's rabbis?

"Well, that was our funny way of putting it. They were in fact the rabbis Stalin never found out about! Learned, religious,

secretly observant Jews, not proper rabbis of course — how could they be real rabbis, the communists took over here round 1917! — who secretly organized a place to pray, not a real shul (synagogue) but what we call here in our Yiddish a *davn-shtub* (a house or room for praying). I'll bet that's a word you never heard in your fancy Vilna Yiddish!"

Dina tells us that the last of "Stalin's rabbis" in the area was Seyel Perlin. Seyel is a deep Lithuanian Yiddish rendition of the biblical name Saul (standard Yiddish Shóel or Shóyel, processed by both *sh* going to *s* and *oy* to *ey*, giving the "deep Lithuanian form").

"From the late 1940s until Seyel's death some twenty five years ago, his house was the prayer-house. If you are interested, it is perfectly preserved. Here is the address. His daughter Merka Perlin still lives in the davn-shtub. A few doors down his son Leizer lives. Good luck to you."

And Dina, like a friendly guiding angel who comes down briefly to tell you what you need to know, disappears into the sandy dusk of latter-day Kabik.

To avoid scaring anybody at night, we retreat to central Polotsk and prepare our return.

Next morning, we decide to seek out Leizer first, and bump into him leaving his house in bright blue workmen's overalls, carrying a ladder. He agrees to speak to us but asks us to wait while he changes into "regular clothing." He also has to cancel the painting job he was booked to do today. He finally emerges and begins to talk about his late father Seyel.

"To my father, Seyel Perlin, keeping the six hundred and thirteen precepts that religious Jews keep, in spite of Stalin's campaign of instilling fear, was the highest ideal. When we returned here from evacuation in Russia after the war, father collected as many prayerbooks and other religious volumes as he could find. He kept them in a clothing cupboard which became for him, and the several dozen Jews who secretly prayed at our house, the holiest of holy arks. It has remained locked since his death but my sister who would never move from the house has the key. We can open it for you, well, if I can persuade her, that is."

Were the worshippers ever harassed? There is a longish silence until we approach the crooked log cabin.

"Well, as you can see," says the seventy year old housepainter, pointing to a shabby but exceptionally tall wooden fence with a charming little miniature roof on top, "that's a rather tall fence hiding the place. When I was a kid, I helped dad put that thing up. I know it doesn't look like much today, but it's still standing! That's a lot more than you can say for Stalin's fences!"

The twelve foot plus fence was erected over half a century ago, to provide a sight and sound barrier.

"Stalin's last years — he died in 1953 — were the worst. People were being arrested and shipped to the gulag for nothing and less than nothing. But the police never found my father's *davn-shtub*!"

"Careful!" he shouts as we reach out for the large wooden gate, eager to see what's behind it. "If you don't open it just so, the whole thing will come down on top of you!"

Inside the dilapidated old shack is Leizer's sister Merka, 76. She is waiting by the house with a bowl of freshly baked *teyglakh* (dough pellets) soaked in honey.

We go through the kitchen, passing the huge stone oven, and enter the eerie, desolate room that was once the mini-synagogue where the pious Jews of Kabik successfully defied Stalin's agents.

What would have happened had they been uncovered?

"It's hard to say," Leizer says. "There was another *davn-shtub* across the river in Polotsk proper. It was never busted as such, but numerous individuals were arrested shortly after emerging from Friday evening services. It was rumored that they arrested mainly communist party members who were caught in the act of praying to God. Good thing they never found us here! Believe you me, quite a nice number of party members would sneak in to have a little pray in father's *davn-shtub*."

The mezuza parchment on the doorframe leading to the prayer room is nailed right into the woodwork. "My father found the parchment after the war, but he could not find a case."

By the eastern wall of the prayer room, in a corner, stands the clothing cupboard. Merka produces a huge, old key and after a few failed tries, creaks the lock open. Then she begins to undo the ball of string that was the second line of defense. There are stacks of dusty books inside. Most do not look like old Hebrew prayer books. One purple bound tome says "Lenin" in large Russian letters. Another says "Stalin."

What on earth are Lenin and Stalin doing in a *davn-shtub*?

"Go and open it!" Leizer commands with an impish smirk.

Only the covers are from standard Soviet fare. Inside, are torn, overused, often disintegrating pages from old Jewish prayerbooks (in Hebrew, many with Yiddish translation underneath), most of them printed in Vilna in the mid nineteenth century. The pages are repaired very amateurishly, with tape and cut pieces of white paper meant to restore right angles, but with a lot of love. One of these, the thinnest in the collection, contains only the text of the Jewish marriage ceremony.

"I'll let you in on a secret," Leizer continues. "I know a number of couples who were secretly married right where you are now standing, back in the 1950s. Father and I made a *chuppa* (wedding canopy) that could quickly be assembled or disassembled." Do you want to see it? It's right here."

There is even a folio, Talmud-size "reader's prayerbook," the one used by the cantor. That one is in its original covers, but with the gold leaf lettering carefully darkened.

At the very bottom of the stack is a pencil-written list of names to be read out at the Yizkor memorial service on Yom Kippur. "Of course they couldn't be read on Yom Kippur itself, so the holiday was sort of rescheduled, turned into a *nidkhe*," Lazier explains, using the traditional term for a holiday that must be postponed (in normal times a practice followed say, when certain fast days clash with the Sabbath and are postponed a day).

After a few hours, Merka begins to panic, as if secret police might still come looking here. "Enough for today," she says, offering a fresh supply of *teyglakh* in honey, "this is for the road, now go."

As we part, she explains, standing by her door (near some vulgar Russian graffiti that she doesn't care to remove), that her brother Leizer brings her food and other necessities. "I don't leave this sacred house. I must stay here and guard it until the day I die. Do you understand? Go and explain it to the Jews in America, ah?!"

RADIN

This speck of a village, like many in Eastern Europe, is renowned in Jewish lore for its association with a personality of historic proportions. He is "the Chofetz Chaim" (Hafetz Chaim), as Rabbi Yisroel-Meir Hakohen (1838—1933) became universally known. The concept "rabbi" in some generalized modern sense (or even in some specific Western orthodox/conservative/reform sense), must not be confused with the concept *rov* (Hebrew *rav*) in pre-war traditional East European Jewish civilization. The plural of *rov* is, we remember from "Stalin's rabbis" — *rabonim* (ra-BUH-nim).

The *rabonim* were the class of intellectuals, writers, scholars and wisemen, only a small percentage of whom served as "town rabbis," "community rabbis" or "rabbis with a synagogue pulpit." The greatest rabonim of any generation were usually beloved, influential personalities, and authors of authoritative, dynamic or popular new books. Some leading rabonim become known by an acronym derived from their Hebrew name, prefixed by *der* (the). Take for example the legendary sixteenth century Golem maker of Prague, the Maharál. "The Maharal" is from the Ashkenazic Hebrew acronym formed from *Moyreynu horav Reb Leyb* (our teacher the rov, Leyb). Modern encyclopedias will, alas, often combine German with modern Hebrew, anything but the authentic Yiddish of the time and place.

A second popular way in which a famed rov's name came into being was via the title of his best known book. This is what came into play in the popular naming of the great sage of little Radin. *Chofetz Chaim* is Hebrew for the biblical "desireth life" and takes its name from three passages in Psalms that determined this man's life:

> Who is the man that desireth life
> and loveth days, that he may see good therein?

Keep thy tongue from evil,
and thy lips from speaking guile.
Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.

(Psalm 34: 13—15)

Yisroel-Meir's first book, which appeared anonymously in Vilna in 1873, was called *Chofetz-Chaim.* From then onwards, he was known as "der Chofetz-Chaim," in the old Ashkenazic tradition of calling a beloved rabbi for his first or best known book. It is a book, by the way, against slander and gossip. Many of his works are dedicated to daily ethics, to honesty in business with people of all faiths, and he became known for his own minimalist life style. In his own home he would not permit soft chairs or other luxuries, and lived the life of a latter day saint.

For much of his long life, the Chofetz-Chaim was the most beloved rabbinic figure in Eastern Europe. His delight in teaching simple people by speaking to them as equals was legendary. Around 1869, so many students had flocked to his home, that is quickly evolved into the famous Radin yeshiva, which quickly became known as the *Radiner yeshive* (Yeshiva of Radin) or the *Chofetz-Chaim's yeshive.*

It is eerie that today there is one Jew alive in Radin, and though he could not read a page of a rabbinic tome, he is also called Meir, and the main theme of his life too is — "desireth life."

*

"Of course I remember Yisroel-Meir," says today's Meir of Radin. Since World War II, Meir Stoler, now 88, has been the only Jew in Radin (now Radun, in western Belarus very close to the Lithuanian border). The townspeople, mostly Poles and Belorussians, refer to him using the loving Yiddish diminutive *–ke.* To everyone here he is Meirke.

Being in a small Jewish minority is itself not something new for Meirke Stoler (though actually *being* that minority is a very post-

Holocaust phenomenon here). He was born in a mostly Christian hamlet, Tetyantza, in 1912, where his was the only Jewish family. "*Stoler* may mean "carpenter" in Yiddish," he remarks, "but we were Jewish blacksmiths in gentile Tetyantza for hundreds of years. My grandfather was a blacksmith and my father was a blacksmith and I am a blacksmith. We specialized in hook plows, harrows, and horseshoes. My grandfather could shoe a horse while it was trotting!"

What did they do for the Jewish holidays? "The odd Jewish families in the surrounding Christian villages — Podbozha and Vishintza — used to team up with us, and between us all we just about had a *minyen*."

When Meirke was seven or eight, disaster hit the family. His father was struck by a paralysis from which he was never to recover. They moved some ten miles down the road, to Eysishok (now Eišiškės, Lithuania). Times were very tough. His sisters went to work as house-servants. "As soon as I turned thirteen, I started working on the roads, lugging stones for construction of the Vilna-Warsaw highway. In 1929, I began to study the art of the smith. My teacher was my grandfather, who became the head of the family after my father's illness."

In September 1939, the Soviets invaded what was then eastern Poland (capturing the sector allotted them by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). They hurried to "give" Vilna and a region around Vilna to the Lithuanians as a "gift" (which was, in fact, a prelude to the swallowing up of all of Lithuania as a Soviet republic in Spring 1940). Eysishok was in that Vilna region.

So, suddenly, Meirke who was born in the Russian Empire and grew up in the Polish Republic now found himself in the Republic of Lithuania (all without moving anywhere). Because of the (in his view) extreme nationalist leaders who ruled independent interwar Lithuania in its final years, he did not want to live under its rule, and picked himself up, and moved to nearby Radin, which was then right across the newly formed border into the Belorussian Republic of the USSR (which is today's border between Lithuania and Belarus). He had frequently visited Radin

from his earliest years. ("The wagoner used to taxi people every day between Eysishok and Radin".)

What does he remember of the Chofetz-Chaim from the earlier years? "He was a small fellow and when I saw him he was already very old, but he would always stop and give me, and anyone else he encountered, a warm *sholem-aleichem* (traditional hello with a handshake). You see it didn't matter that he was Yisroel-Meir, the great Chofetz-Chaim, and I was little Meirke the blacksmith. By then, in his old age, he would often fall down, and pick himself up immediately. Come, I'll show you his house."

We come to the old wooden house near the town square. "It's better not to go inside," he says. "The people who live there are used to rich Americans coming and giving them money. One guy offered a hundred dollars for the wood trimming above a window. I think that's terrible and let me tell you, I'm not a learned man, but I know the Chofetz-Chaim would also think that that's terrible."

We walk a few steps and come to the present-day *Dom-kultur* ("house of culture"), the local town clubhouse. "This was the Chofetz Chaim's yeshiva. Radin was flooded with about five hundred *prushim* who studied here. They hovered about town like ghosts, immersed in their learning, oblivious to the rest of us. It was as if we just weren't there!"

The building is still recognizably an erstwhile yeshiva. But now, every Saturday night, psychedelic lights of every hue blast out of the windows along with rock and roll.

In the Yiddish of this region, *prúshim* (usually translated as "self-denying ascetics" or some such) refers to a certain type of *yeshive-bokher* ("yeshiva student") who was particularly poor, and shunned luxuries.

Meirke then takes us to what is left of the old Jewish cemetery. In the 1980s, a Soviet official ordered the cemetery destroyed. Unlike many other towns, where Jewish gravestones went into ballast for roads or became foundation stones for new houses, many of the Radin stones were simply thrown into a swamp not far away. "A few years went by, and Jews from abroad

paid to have them dug out and put up again. Of course, they no longer stand over the remains of the people whose names are inscribed on them, but at least they stand. The Chofetz-Chaim's gravesite was found," Meirke recalls, "but his gravestone was not, and some Israeli Jews erected a brand new stone, which stands today, right here."

At the edge of the cemetery is the mass grave site of the Jews of Radin.

In September 1941, the Nazis, who had occupied Radin in June, locked up the town's Jewish population in a fenced off section that became the local ghetto. They were kept there until May 10th, 1942, when the 2,130 Jews incarcerated there (Radiners and the those from surrounding villages brought to the Radin ghetto), were force-marched to the grave site, shot and buried (many still alive). "The earth moved and puffed out smoke for a long time," says Meirke, quoting some local peasants who witnessed the shooting.

"In other towns, the Germans used peasants to dig the killing pits. But in Radin, they wanted the Jews to dig their own pits. Early in the morning, on May 10th, they picked the fifty or so fittest young men, gave each of us a shovel and marched us to the old Jewish cemetery. I was strong as iron, a blacksmith, and so I got picked as one of them.

"We were in sight of the cemetery when the chief officer turned away a few moments to determine the number of meters long and wide, and so forth. I said to the fellows around me: "You do what you want. Hell No! I'm a Jew and a blacksmith [*Ikh bin a yid un a shmid*], I'm not digging my own grave!"

"I shouted "Hurrah!" and took my shovel and banged the German soldier guarding me over the head. He fell to the ground unconscious. Believe you me, when I hit somebody with a shovel in those years, the man would not get up very soon. I ran for the forest with all my might. In the confusion, some others started running in every direction."

"Another German," Meirke says, pointing, "a gendarme, started to chase me on a horse from that direction. He fired maybe

fifteen times from the distance but missed. As he was closing in on me and preparing to shoot at close range, I grabbed a stone and hurled it at him. I missed him but hit the horse. The horse stopped short and raised its front legs into the air in pain. The German's bullets went straight up into the air.

"He got off the wounded horse and tried to shoot again, but he was out of bullets by then. He realized I would be gone into the forest by the time he could reload and we started struggling man to man. I hit him hard and knocked him unconscious too. And I ran into the forest.

"Let me tell you, there are some absolutely wonderful people around here in the homesteads and hamlets, especially in a hamlet called Mizhantz. Polish people. They hid me and gave me food. Later on I was able to acquire some weapons. The Germans put a high price on my head but none of the Polish people who helped me ever betrayed me."

Meirke Stoler survived his years in the forest without a scratch, but lost his right hand to a faulty machine in the local *kolkhoz*, or Soviet collective farm, in the early 1950s.

"And so here I am! If I was destined to survive, then I must remain here in Radin, and I must die here in Radin. Let the young people today know what a Jew looks like. Anyway, I'm in no hurry to die. Whenever religious people come here from America or Israel they always look me up. Some of them are very funny people, Jews who wear a yarmulka (skullcap) but can't speak a word of Yiddish. But they always tell me I have to live until the proverbial hundred and twenty. They've said it so many times, who knows, maybe they've talked me into it.

"They are funny people. One rich American came with a translator, a young woman, from Vilna. He showed me pictures of his racing horses and his overdone daughter stroking one of them. I told him "You have a boring life, and I wouldn't exchange mine for yours." He left upset. American Jews seem to care about money and wealth more than anything else."

Then Meirke, standing on the spot where he hit the German over the shovel, and became the survivor of Radin, begins to reflect on his own life.

"A human being was born to live, not be killed by a fascist's bullet. All those people who believed in God, there they are in the mass grave. Where is God, what kind of a God? I believed in common sense, a human being was born to live, and I wasn't going to dig my own grave. That's why I'm here today."

*

A few days later, I returned to the cemetery to reflect on the old stones recovered from the swamp and placed in rows, the grave of the Chofetz-Chaim, and the adjacent mass grave. I saw some people and went over to say hello. Many Jews come in the summer months to the Chofetz-Chaim's town (and the town sign "Radun" disappears rather frequently as a choice souvenir for religious Jews from abroad). I was curious and went nearer to the people.

My curiosity turned to amazement when I saw that a fresh grave was being dug right beside the mass grave. There was my cousin from Tel Aviv, Abrashke Rogovsky, yelling commands in Russian to three gravediggers. "Another half a meter over here!" and "More space for the concrete between the frame and the earth!"

We hadn't seen each other for years, and were thrilled and flabbergasted to bump into each other, of all places, at the old Jewish cemetery in Radin. Abrashke is a native of Radin, son of one of my father's aunts, Chashka, from Michaleshik. Chashka, one of Aaron-Velvel Gubersky's ten children, married a young man from Radin and moved down here early in the twentieth century.

What followed comes from a black comedy. "What are *you* doing here?" we shouted at each other in perfect unison. I was traveling up and down Belarus looking for the last old Jews in villages. He, in turn, had come to dig his grave.

"Are you alright?" I asked, suddenly worried.

"Never been healthier," he barked in his machine-gun like Yiddish, and lifted a huge stone to show me that his strength had not waned. I felt faint looking at the thing.

"Then what is this all about?"

"I've decided to be buried here in Radin. I'll probably die in Tel Aviv, and my nephew's wife, a top lawyer, will make sure that nobody gets a penny from my will until my body is shipped here for burial."

One of the workmen cracks a joke.

"With such a nice big grave, concrete walls and all that space, he can put a television set and a microwave in there, too."

"Maybe even a nice girl," quips another.

Abrashke, enjoying all this, tells him to go and find the girl "right now, or else."

But this is serious business. He checked all over the region until he found Pavel Staselovitch, a young Belorussian entrepreneur who recently set up a monument business handling all aspects of the trade, from importing exotic stones to producing beautiful inscriptions in the language of your choice. His clients are the tiny minority of rich here. "Nomenklatura (party big-wigs) and mafia," he told me off the record. He apparently got the impression from Abrashke that Jews have their graves dug and their gravestones inscribed during their own lives, in the place of their family's origin. He therefore thought I might be a new client, and when he found out that my roots are in Michaleshik way up north, he hastened to reassure me. "No problem, give me a call, here's my card!"

We turn to the mass grave site, where the 2,130 Jews who had been imprisoned in the Radin ghetto were shot and buried. The old Soviet-era monument to the martyred "peace loving Soviet citizens" (no mention of their Jewishness) is gone. Abrashke, who has befriended everyone here from the mayor on down, had it removed. His biggest ally in the fight to have it changed was the director of the town museum, which now has a "Jewish wall."

The museum director is a dedicated multiculturalist, proud of the rich heritage of Radin's peoples through the ages, and his museum is a gem as museums in Belarus go. I asked his story. He was once a teacher in the local school. He came home one day to find his wife in bed with a young man. He slit the young man's throat and more or less severed his head, went to prison a few years and — became the town hero. When he was released, some law or other prevented him for teaching ever again. So they made him head of the museum.

Now, with permission from the town's rulers, Abrashke is representing a group of Radin-born Jews in Israel, and is commissioning a new monument in memory of the town's Jews.

We ride with Mr. Staselovitch into the nearby city, Lida, to his workshop, where the new monument is being prepared. It reads, in Russian, English, and Hebrew: "2130 Jews were slaughtered and buried in this mass grave by the Germans and their helpers on 10 May 1942."

It didn't take a moment, and Abrashke and I were in a brawl over his refusal to include Yiddish. I told him the Jews of Radin all spoke Yiddish and it was wrong to omit the victims' language. He told me that the monument is for today's visitors from Israel and America, not the victims.

Our argument at the grave masons' workshop in Lida deteriorated rapidly, and, after yelling ourselves hoarse, we finally agree not to discuss the issue any more during our sojourn in Radin. But I did manage to get in my "threat" to one day put up an additional small stone in Yiddish, whether he likes it or not.

We carry on to the Lida Metal Factory, which had been founded in 1902 by the Shapiro brothers, and was nationalized when the Soviets first invaded in 1939. Abrashke unzips his trendy Israeli shoulder-strap bag and puts millions upon millions of Belorussian rubles on the table (the official rate that week was 28,000 to the dollar). "I purposely got all small notes so you'll have a big job counting," he says with a mischievous grin. Two assistants spend an hour and a half counting. This is for the new metal fence to be constructed around the mass grave. When it's all counted up, the exasperated factory director says, "Go! You can

sleep in peace. The fence will be finished by sundown on Tuesday." It was.

We returned to the intriguing question of his own grave in Radin. At the same workshop in Lida, a small stone is inscribed for "Abrashke Rogovsky, 1923 — ," the blank to be filled in one day as appropriate.

True to form, Abrashke says that if I want to hear more, I must come to the unveiling ceremony the following Sunday.

The president of the Jewish community in Lida, Tamara Baradatch, a powerful woman in her forties, opened the proceedings, with force and dignity. There were moving speeches by Heersh Chosid, head of the Grodna Jewish community, and Leonid Levin of Minsk, chairman of the Jewish communities in Belarus. They were followed by the mayor of Radin and the head of the local Polish community. The townspeople round with love on Meirke Stoler, the last Jew living in Radin, and people squabbled to kiss him first.

Finally, Abrashke is called upon to speak. His comments (in Russian), included the following.

"My life has been all about things I do not understand. I only lived in Radin the first sixteen years of my life, but it is this place that matters to me most. In 1940, I did not understand why I was arrested by Soviet police for wearing a Zionist t-shirt. I spent the war years in various Russian labor camps, and of course, that is why I survived. I returned here after the war and could not understand why everybody I knew was murdered, only because they were Jews.

"In more recent years, I could not understand why someone ordered all the old gravestones here on the old Jewish cemetery to be thrown into a swamp.

"And, to tell you the truth, I cannot understand why my children have so little interest in our roots here. I love my beautiful wife and my three beautiful children in Tel Aviv, but I have decided to be buried here, among my first family, and where my father's family lived for centuries. By the way, I do not know exactly where my father is buried. His stone was one of those

never found in the swamp. But here I have a photograph of the stone, in case anyone wants to see it.

"My children have no interest in Radin, and probably no interest in me. If I were buried in Tel Aviv, they might not even come to visit my grave. But to get their inheritance, they will have to come here once. And it will change them, after my death."

Later that day, as we parted, I wanted to tell Abrashke that if his children knew (or at least appreciated) Yiddish, they would not be so disinterested in him and his roots. But I remembered our agreement to drop the subject.

Some local gentiles keep placing flowers on both the mass grave, and on the new smaller one. They do not realize that this one is a grave-in-waiting, that its designated resident is alive and well in Tel Aviv.

PODBRODZ

We must not forget Ziske Shapiro, translator and scout on most of the last decade's expeditions. Whenever we'd arrive in a town, he'd usually find the oldest Jews in minutes. Hard to believe that over a decade has passed since we met in his barbershop just before the bridge over the river Zhemyana, which cuts through Podbrodz (pudd-BRUDZ or pudd-BRUDJ).

He didn't have the barbershop for too long after that. The Soviet Union collapsed and the new Lithuanian government privatized such establishments.

"Can you imagine, I lost my barbershop when they privatized everything here. I am a master barber who trained eighteen other barbers over the years. Two women I had trained bought it up. I couldn't and I wouldn't anyway. I don't believe in capitalism, you see! But I do believe in work, so without losing a day, I set up here at home."

Home is a damp dingy quarter, carved out of an old wooden structure that once housed the modern Hebrew school in the town (which is now Pabrade in Lithuanian). It has no running water, and a slop pale serves for a toilet.

"I will tell it to you straight, my friend," says the only Jew in town. He loves to shock foreign visitors with his unpopular political views. "Just imagine, fifty states have their own traditions, but they all recognize Washington! But since the Soviet Union collapsed, any *shmendrik* can set himself up without recognizing Moscow! Well mark my words, if they don't have good relations with Moscow, there will be big trouble in these parts."

But after giving up his barber shop without a fight, Ziske drew a line in the sand when they came round to privatize people's apartments (selling them to long-time occupants for a symbolic price). "A man, a young Lithuanian from the local authorities,

came around and invited me to buy this dump, can you imagine? 'This was a Jewish town,' I told him, 'all the Jews were murdered, there is one Jew left in his hovel with no running water in a building that was once the Jewish school here, and you want *me* to buy it from *you*?! Get out!' I told him. God did he run away trembling!"

Ziske takes no money from handicapped people. He charges healthy people the equivalent of 50¢ for a haircut. The one barber shop in town (the one he ran from the late 1940s until 1992) now charges about two dollars.

When there are no customers, he brazenly stands outside his former shop and stops every male entering (saying only "Good Day" to the females). He barks "Perverted!" at men entering the place to have their hair cut by one of the two women who bought him out. "The technical term," he explains wryly, is *sukhoy ananizm* [Russian for "dry masturbation"]. You tell your friends to come to my house down the road for an honest haircut from an old master!"

Ziske Shapiro became an apprentice barber himself back in 1932 in his native Ignalina, further northeast. That town is now best known for its Soviet-built nuclear power plant. The entire area (including today's Lithuanian capital, Vilnius) had been part of Poland between the wars. The Soviets took it over in 1939 and it was in the Lithuanian Republic of the USSR, and from 1991, in independent Lithuania.

When the Nazis invaded in June 1941, Ziske recalls, many of the older Jews wouldn't dream of trying to escape. He recounts what all the other flight-survivors recount: "They remembered the Germans as the most civilized of the armies during the First World War. These are not soldiers who would go around shooting innocent civilians!"

But Ziske decided to believe the old wandering beggar, Chaim-Meir of Svir, who had for years been telling people that Hitler was boasting he would murder all the Jews. This was the same Chaim-Meir of Svir who had told my grandmother Badonna of her son's Eltshik's illness in the German labor camp. And it turns out that this wandering beggar was even spared from the

Holocaust. When the rich people, Jews and non-Jews alike, were being rounded up for deportation to Siberia in early June 1941, not long before the German invasion, Chaim-Meir said "If they are taking away the rich people, we should follow." He voluntarily got on one of the trains deporting people to Siberia. His fate is unknown.

After three days of studying the faces of the German occupiers in June 1941, Ziske fled for his life eastward into Russia and joined the Red Army. Wounded three times, he is a decorated war hero. When he returned home after the war, in 1945, he found out that all the Jews of Ignalina, including his mother, had been herded to the edge of a pit in a nearby town in October 1941, and shot, for being Jews. "I tried to return home to Ignalina but I only lasted a week. Too many nightmares. So I came south to Svintsyan for a while, and then further south here to Podbrodz."

Although he is grateful to have survived by serving in the Red Army, and for the many years of "a decent life" under the Soviets, he acknowledges that the Soviet system "just did not work."

Like many whose lives have not turned out quite as they would have hoped, Ziske sees one primeval tragedy as having made way for the circumstances which allowed all the others to follow. That tragedy, he tells us, taking off his apron after finishing the second fellow's haircut, is called "tee-TAH-nik." He is shocked to learn that we have heard the name (and the story) before. "No!? What, they still remember in America that a ship hit an iceberg and sank in 1912?" He is even more flabbergasted to hear that there was a "blak-BOS-ter fill-em" in the west about the ship.

Now Ziske's life has not been a catalogue of happiness, but why blame the Titanic? He proceeds, in his rich Lithuanian Yiddish, to recollect the milestones. His father died in 1924, when he was a little boy. Then came the Holocaust in which his mother was shot and buried in the local mass grave. And when he was finally accommodating himself to the Soviet regime after the war, Stalin intensified his repression. "We were afraid to be caught with a Yiddish book in those years. Finally, better years came under Brezhnev."

But just when he should have begun enjoying his standing in town as the master barber, independence came, the shop was privatized, and he was unceremoniously ejected from the going concern he had built over nearly half a century. "But that was not the last straw." He had been saving half a century for his retirement, all in Soviet rubles of course. The money became worthless just when he was forced out of his shop. The state pension does keep him alive, but little more than that. He depends on friends in the west to send him razor blades and other hairdressing paraphernalia.

But what does any of this have to do with the Titanic?

"I was just getting to that. You see, this is not the first time that all the money suddenly became worthless. But forget the money, if that ship hadn't hit that darned iceberg — "My luck!" my mother would say — we would have all moved to America when I was a little boy."

What is he talking about?

"Well, it's like this. . ." the master barber begins, sitting himself down in his own makeshift barber's chair looking at his reflection in the mirror, almost as if it were an analyst's couch.

"After the failed revolution of 1905, the two families — my father's, the Shapiros, and my mother's, the Gilinskys — decided that things will never be stable in these parts. We had to make it to America, the *góldene medíne* ("golden land"). But how?

"Those years, there was a simple formula. Find the most able young man in the family, and send him the first. He will bring us all over as soon as he prospers, and of course, in America, someone who is able prospers.

"So whom did they send?" Ziske asks out loud. After a long expectant pause, he comes out with the name — "my uncle Lazier" (rhymes with "razor"). Leizer was a master locksmith who invented a pick-proof lock and developed innovative new locks for local branches of the czarist government.

But the earnings of the young locksmith only sufficed to pay the fare to London. He turned up in Whitechapel, London's equivalent to New York's Lower East Side. Leizer re-christened

himself Leslie Gilinsky, and began to work for a locksmith on Whitechapel's Old Montague Street, London E1.

A few months later, he struck lucky. Or so it seemed.

"One acquaintance told another who told a third about the young genius locksmith" says Ziske, recounting the version his parents passed on to him, "and Leizer was offered passage to America on the greatest ship ever built in return for working as a locksmith on board. He would sleep with the workmen and would soon be in America. The ship was called *Titanic."*

When the family back home in Ignalina received the letter with these tidings they were overjoyed.

"And then one fine day in April 1912, news of the shipwreck came through on the wires. They were brokenhearted and ridden with a kind of guilt. Why didn't he just stay here?"

But that is not the end of the story.

In 1913, Ziske's grandfather Shleime Gilinsky (the ill-fated locksmith's father), received a letter from the Lloyds of London insurance office in St. Petersburg, informing him, first, that his son's body was recovered on an ice floe and taken to America for burial, and second, that he had purchased the equivalent of 35,000 rubles worth of life insurance before embarking in London.

That sum of money should have made the frugal family secure for generations. Ziske's grandfather hitched up his horse and wagon and made for St. Petersburg. The people at Lloyds told him he could have the money in gold coins or in banknotes. "Naturally," says Ziske, with a sudden return of the wry smile, "my grandfather was no fool. With all the bandits lurking in the forests, you do not drive a wagon full of gold!

"He carefully wrapped up the banknotes in sacks and made it home safely. For about a year, the family's poverty was alleviated, although the hero locksmith lay in a New Jersey cemetery, having enriched his family back in the Old Country in an unexpected, macabre way. All on account of an iceberg. Feh!"

But it was not to last. World War I broke out in 1914, the Germans invaded, the Russian Empire collapsed, Ignalina became

part of the new Polish Republic in 1920, and — the old czarist rubles were worthless.

"When I was a kid, our house was wallpapered top to bottom with the czarist banknotes from the Titanic insurance money for poor Uncle Leizer. There were so many notes about that we papered up the outhouse too. The only outhouse in all of Ignalina with wallpaper!

"I should have learned the lesson but I didn't. We thought the Soviet Union was forever, so I saved up Soviet rubles all my life. Who could have thought they would become as worthless as the insurance money from the Titanic, ah?

"But the real villain is the iceberg. Uncle Leizer in America? He would have owned a lock factory by the mid 1920s and brought us all over. What do you think. . ."

Through it all, Ziske loves to laugh, poke fun, and have a drink. "My wife died over ten years ago, I think it's time for me to get married again. Maybe you know someone in America? She will never find a better barber, that I assure you. And if she's worried about my age, I'll tell her the story of the two lost fortunes. The czarist empire wasn't forever, the Soviet Union wasn't forever, nothing is forever, except maybe Lloyds of London is forever, ah!"

MIOR

In the far northwest of today's Belarus, there is a village called Mior (mee-ORR). Between the wars, the place was in the far northeast of then-Poland. In Jewish culture, it's in the depths of Lithuania. Turning from political and cultural situation to its demography, there were one hundred and fifty families who lived here before the war. Of them about ten were Christian. Then as now, the place is far from any city, and not known for much except the flax trade in years gone by.

We found four Jews in Mior, and true to stereotype, they are divided into two camps.

One couple is pro-Soviet, though, like the odd couple of Drisa, not far to the north, their Jewish cultural content is entirely dissimilar, going back to which side of the interwar border they came from. The husband, Moshkevich, is a retired Soviet army officer from "deep Russia" who understands, but cannot speak Yiddish. His wife, Anna Lazarevna Moshkevich, by contrast, hails from a village not far from here, Bildyug (bill-DYUG or bill-DYUZ), and speaks a magnificent Vilna Province Yiddish. In fact, thanks to her, we were able to set Bildyug as the northeastern most outpost of "pure" Vilna province (central Lithuanian) Yiddish. A few miles to the east, and the Belorussian sub-dialect takes over in stages. Bildyug, down a dirt road from Mior, was a Jewish agricultural colony, with close links to its "mother village" Nay-Pahost.

The husband and wife team, the Moshkeviches are still Soviet loyalists, proud that the Soviet Union defeated the Nazis here, and proud that in the post war years, the regime gave their children higher education (previously unthinkable).

But for all her decades of active and enthusiastic participation in the local Soviet institutions, Mrs. Moshkevich turns into a different person when she switches into her rich pre-war Bildyug Yiddish. Along with the switch from Russian to

Yiddish, it is as if Anna Moshkevich is again becoming the pre-war young girl Chaika Mushkat (the name means "nutmeg," and is an old Jewish family name, as in Bashevis Singer's *Family Moskat*). As a young girl, she had been known in the area as Chaika Leizer-Isser's (that is to say, Chaika [CHAI-keh, loving diminutive of Chaya] the daughter of Leizer who is himself the son of Isser (an old Yiddish form for "Israel").

Her father had two Singer machines. There were seven brothers and sisters. They used to travel around in villages with the machine, mend the clothes of Christian peasants in surrounding villages, where they would often sleep over, and would return home to Bildyug with a wagon full of food. Chaika describes her father as *a kluger yid un a sheyner yid* which translates literally as "a clever Jew and a beautiful Jew" but if you really understand the deep local Yiddish it means "a fellow who was both intelligent and gentle." Had he had any money, he would have sent her of his seven children to the secondary school or *gimnazye* in Druya, but they were poor, and she spend her childhood and adolescence accompanying him on his trips, sewing and sewing, riding through the wooded pathways on all sides to sew some more and collect some more food for the family in return. Chaika remarks that she hardly ever used the Polish zloty, the family's economy was one of bartering clothing repair for food and whatever household necessities occasionally came up. Chaika and her brothers and sisters enjoyed a special status in Bildyug, because their mother Rassel was born in Vilna.

Chaika talks through the evening about her childhood. Invoking a title of one of classic Yiddish author Sholem-Aleichem's books, she says that they were all "oreme un freylakhe" (poor and happy people). There was no hard floor in the house. For Peysakh (Passover), they put straw on the earthen floor. Later on her father sold his watch to buy another house where there was a real floor. Her father would sew late into the night by the light of an oil lamp.

Every Monday morning Chaika and her father would set off. Chaika was responsible for taking care of the box with the two plates and silverware, the Christian clients knew to cook only

milkhike makholim, dairy or meatless foods. They would always return home for the Sabbath. There was cholent, the traditional Sabbath food prepared in advance and left to stay warm in the oven, mother would bless the candles, father would pray, then at nightfall on Saturday perform the *havdola* (division) ceremony marking the return to weekday life. The preparations would start for the horse-and-wagon trip around the hamlets, Tribukhovshtshene, Volkushtshene, Snieg, Liesneye and others. One sewing machine they would leave at home, the other one they would take with them. Both were operated by foot pedal.

Chaika's elementary school was the traditional cheider where the teacher was Reb Dovid-Shleime Pukel. The Jewish agricultural colony had its own little prayerhouse with two little floors, downstairs for the men and upstairs for women.

Whether life got better or worse on September 17th 1939, when the Soviets marched in, invariably has "something" to do with the survivor's post-war and present cultural and political orientations. For Chaika it is clear.

"Life became better. My father worked on, but instead of being his assistant tailor I joined the komsomol [communist youth league] and made many friends with young people of different faiths and backgrounds, all working together for a better life for everyone."

Her pre-war non-Jewish language had been Polish. The new authorities sent her for free to an intensive Russian course at a new Soviet school where she also studied history, literature and mathematics. It became illegal to use the word *zhid,* the derogatory word for Jew, or other ethnic slurs.

When the Germans launched their surprise attack in the early hours of Sunday June 22nd 1941, Chaika was at a Saturday night party that was blasting into the early hours of Sunday. A non-Jewish friend standing on the bridge at Bildyug told her she must flee for her life, that those who were Jewish *as well as* employees of the communist administration would have no hope of survival once the Germans took over. She made by foot for Glubok, stayed overnight and continued onto Polotsk. There, men who wanted to resist were told to join the partisans in the forest. Women were

sent to dig trenches. That kind of open military resistance crumbled rapidly as it became apparent that the Red Army itself was fleeing. A veterinarian from Vitebsk who had a horse and carriage, took her to Vitebsk. But by the 29th of June, the Germans were closing in on Vitebsk too, and Chaika just picked herself up and walked and walked and walked in the direction of the rising sun. She followed the canal to Smolensk and made friends with another Jewish escapee, Taibel Dagovitch. At Smolensk she and Taibel caught a train to deep Russian territory. They got off at Tambov and worked in a factory until the end of the war.

In 1944, Chaika returned to Bildyuz and found that her parents, sisters, grandparents, all — were shot by the Germans. Like so many of the Jews we have met on our journeys up and down the Old Country, Chaika wishes to recite the names of her brothers and sisters: "Chaika, I am Chaika; Yisrolke; Zamke, whose formal name was Zalmen; Tsipa; Malla-Malka; Sonia; Chanka." There is something almost biblical in the tone, and at the same time, the long, sad Jewish ring of martyrology texts that sound like they could come from the first *memorbikher* (memorial books) that became an Ashkenazic genre in the wake of the first Crusade of 1096.

She visited Israel several years ago and returned in a state of rather pleasant shock: "Azeyfl yidn, ale yidn!" (so many Jews, all Jews).

All the while her husband is uncomfortable with this talk in Yiddish to foreigners, but Chaika knows how to placate him. Our visit ends with a tour of the massive garden and its many inhabitants, including two cows, a dog, a dozen chickens, and a huge pig, which Chaika assures us is for sale only, as if *we* had come to judge *her* Jewishness. . .

We discreetly bid our farewells, determined to visit the "religious" family Chaika has told us about. She uses the word in a mildly derogatory sense, to imply primitives who still believe in spooks and hocus pocus, and who still believe in separation of the races. One thing had to be made clear however. With the exception of Avrom-Yankev back in Radashkovitz, we've never

met anybody who is "orthodox" in the Jewish sense of this term in the west, implying observance of the commandments, regular prayer, Sabbath and kosher food observance, and so forth. As in Kabik, religion here means the observance of essential traditions, the belief in God and other fundamentals, not the pre-war civilization with its multitude of traditions covering every part of daily life.

Still, we are more and more intrigued to meet the "religious" mother and son who are the only other Jews in town. It's a five minute walk to the town square where they live in an old wooden house.

Although the two pairs of surviving Jews barely speak to each other, they do exchange traditional Yiddish greetings for times of the day, week, month and year. Surprising what can last.

The mother is a poor, bent elderly lady called Sorka Bedchen Tzipin, herself a native of Kraslava (now, as in her youth, across the border in Latvia). After the war she married Efraim Tzipin of Mior and moved here to Mior. He died some years ago, and now she lives with their only son, Yankel, who is therefore the only proper Miorian born Jew in Mior, albeit of postwar vintage. She is a retired seamstress and he is a manager at the local post office.

He proudly shows us his Russian-Yiddish dictionary and his mother, with equal pride, produces an old women's prayer book, of nineteenth century Vilna vintage. But the coup de resistance is to come. The rotund Yankel, in his gray post office worker's jacket climbs a ladder with ease that seems unnatural for a man of his weight, and comes down with beautiful old *megilla*, a scroll of the Book of Esther read on the Jewish holiday of Purim. It was his father's, his grandfather's and his great-grandfather's.

"I cannot read the Hebrew but I've read the Book of Esther in Russian many times," so I know every word of this scroll. It's about anti-Semitism and trying to get rid of Jews in countries in which they live."

Looking around the large house with its many elegant pre-war features (most prominently, highly detailed roses around the ceiling lighting fixtures), and the vast garden on all sides, thinking of the location on the town square and his prestigious job as postmaster, we gently ask if anyone is trying to get rid of him and his mother.

"I was hoping you would ask," he says with a triumphant smile. In the Book of Esther there's a bad guy called Haman who persuades the powers of the country where he has influence to come up with anti-Jewish edict. It has been the same for us in Mior. Everything was fine all my life, and throughout my father's life. They wouldn't have started up with him, a decorated World War II veteran, you know everyone here is united on that."

"So then what happened?" we try to urge him on.

"Well, some Haman on the town council decided that he didn't want a Jewish family living in the center of town. You walked over from those communist Jews, didn't you, just now?"

A shtetl remains a shtetl, everyone knows everything.

"Yes."

"Well," he continues, with a reassuring stroke of his hand that indicates he is not rebuking us for not having come to him and his mother first, "what I meant was that you must have noticed how much empty space there is in our little town, how much room there is to build blocks of flats."

We are as puzzled as ever.

"Well, the town council decided that they were going to build their new blocks of flats on the town square and that our house would have to come down. They offered us a flat in the new building, but what kind of offer is that, we have our own big house, the house of my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, a house on the town square of Mior!"

His mother, Sorka, interrupts, to his annoyance, to ask if we know any eligible young Jewish ladies in the west who might like to marry a handsome postmaster from Belarus. For both men and women, being well-built is often considered a sign of both health

and beauty. No twiggy image here. Out of respect to his mother, Yankel doesn't rebuke her but explains quickly: "There aren't many bachelors my age here but I promised my father before he died that I would not marry a non-Jew, and there are no Jews here to marry. So what can I do? A promise is a promise, I am not a charlatan! It's not that I don't like the *krasávitses* in town, believe you me," he adds, using the Yiddish-from-Russian terms for "beautiful girl."

Continuing "the break from the main story" Sorka wants us to know something about the communist couple we had just visited, particularly the husband. We had seen the pig in their backyard, and didn't think much of it one way or the other. But in a deep local Yiddish, Sorka lashes out at the decorated retired Soviet army veteran:

"*Ikh hob aleyn gezen vi er grizhet di eyvern fun khazer!*" (With my own eyes, I saw how he chews the ears of the pig!)

While we are unimpressed by the "sin," they are thrilled at the obvious delight this delectable local Yiddish has brought to their unexpected guest from a faraway land.

Mother and son go back to their story, and emphasize, in the spirit of telling a story with full truthfulness, that they were offered first choice of the apartments-to-be-built, which, unlike their own house, would have running water, indoor plumbing, and central heating (which in these parts refers to a town-wide system of radiators, through which hot water is pumped from a single large furnace, at times and for durations decided on by the powers that be).

But for the Tzipins, it is a matter of principle to live on in the *yerúshe-shtub* (Yiddish for "inherited house"), which stands on the site of a previous cabin that had been in the family for generations. For Yankel, the house and his campaign to prevent it being demolished, are symbols of Jewish survival here beyond the Holocaust. "Our family lived in Mior for hundreds of years. The Jews of Mior were all murdered, but my father, Efraim Tzipin survived, and came back here, built a new family, worked all his life as a tinsmith, and guarded his father's house until his death. Why should I let it be knocked down now?"

It is a special source of pride that the house faces the town square. Before 1939, the square was the site of the flax market, held each Monday. Typically, the Soviets turned the square into a mini-park featuring an oversize statue of Lenin. But the prestige of living "on the town square" lingers on regardless.

For a decade, mother and son wrote letters to as many local and national officials as they could find, first in the last Soviet years, and since 1991, in Belarus. "I run the post office here, so I can find the right addresses!"

The Tzipins recruited the support of the new central Jewish community organization in Minsk. At times things got very bitter. One local official told them: "We don't need Jews on the town square." This is the man he calls Haman, relishing the Jewish education he gave himself under the inspiration of the scroll of the Book of Esther in his attic. Asked about emigration, mother and son turn indignant. Why should *we* leave? If someone doesn't like us, and can't find a better place to build their building, let *them* leave.

We kept in touch with the Tzipins through most of the 1990s. In the end, and with considerable help from sympathetic government officials, they won their battle.

The town planners changed all the plans, opting for a new row of smaller buildings, laid out around the Tzipins" home in a semi-circle, a little bit like the American highway built around the house of the lady who just would not move.

But it was a pyrrhic victory. "Someone" also decided to run the sewage pipes for the new apartments right under the Tzipins" back garden. For "some" reason, sewage leaks out profusely, and the ample vegetable garden, which used to provide a big part of their food supply, has become a foul-scented swamp.

After several months, the seepage reached underneath the house and rotted away the floorboards, some of which have collapsed along with the supporting joists.

They have now decided to give up and move to Israel. "It is incredibly generous," says Sarah, that "Israel accepts such hesitant immigrants as we are." "But," adds her son, with a wistful look

toward the intricately carved plaster rose around the ceiling light up above, "we will always dream about our house on the town square of Mior."

SLONIM

The very name *Slónim* sounds so Jewish, as if it were a creation of Yiddish, not Slavic. Among the many folk etymologies that abound are the humorous combination of the Russian word for elephant with the Hebrew pluralizing suffix *–im*. But Slonim isn't known in Jewish history for its humor, nor as a city of elephants. It is rather a name that evokes a rush of sanctity as a Lithuanian city of learning, and its adjective, *Slónimer* (of Slonim, coming from Slonim), is a mark of honor.

The list of top rabbinic minds goes back at least to the 1660s when the community's rabbi was Moyshe Lima who lived approximately from 1605 to 1658). He went on to become the chief judge of Vilna, somehow linking the two cities in the Lithuanian Jewish psyche. His Talmudic commentary, put together by his son, is called *Khélkes Mekhóykek* (*Helkát Mehoqéq)*. It means "Portion of the Lawgiver," referring probably to the unhappy lot of the lawmaker who must render painful and difficult decisions. The reference here is to the unhappy lot of the *agúne* (modern Hebrew *agunâ*), a woman who does not know whether her husband is dead or alive, or cannot prove his death, and may be prevented from remarrying. The *Khélkes Mekhóykek* may be the most difficult rabbinic book ever written in Lithuania, it needs its own commentary to be understood. It is itself a commentary, and so, in other words, it needs a commentary upon a commentary to make sense. The title, "Portion of the Lawgiver" ("The Legislator's Lot" might be a better translation), takes its name from Deuteronomy 33, where the original reference is, no doubt, to another time and place, another set of problems. When Moses blessed the twelve tribes he blessed Gad thusly (emphasis added):

> And of Gad he said:

> Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head. And he provided the first part for himself, because there, in a *portion of the lawgiver*, was he seated; and he came with the heads of the people, he executed the justice of the Lord, and his judgments with Israel.
>
> (Deuteronomy 33: 20-21)

The tradition of Jewish intellectual leadership at Slonim continued unabated through the generations. Joshua Shapira was a leading rabbinic author there in the earlier nineteenth century. By the middle of that century, Avrom Weinberg (1804 — 1884) founded a brand new branch of Hasidism, combining the intellectuality of Lithuanian Hasidism of the Chabad-Lubavitch variety with the emotionality of the more southerly trends. The famed Slónimer yeshive, the great rabbinic academy of Slonim, switched from traditional Vilna style learning to the style of the new Slonim dynasty.

Between the wars, when Slonim was part of Poland, its rabbinic culture continued to flourish alongside all the modern Jewish movements, including Zionism and Bundism. The *Slonimer Vort* appeared from 1926 right up to the outbreak of war in 1939.

We ended up in Slonim sooner than planned. In Baranovitsh, to the east, we attended the modern Hebrew classes sponsored by the Israeli department responsible for education in the former Soviet Union (all Hebrew, no Yiddish, to this day, even in areas where the indigenous Jewish culture is Yiddish). The teacher, Yefim Malkin, a young middle aged fellow whose Yiddish was rather better than the Hebrew he was teaching, told us that his next class is in Slonim. He was happy to have the ride and we were happy to have a guide who knows the turf.

True to his word, Yefim took us to the meeting place where the old Jews of Slonim gather each evening. As in other larger

towns, most of the Jews who live there today don't hail from there, but rather from small villages. After the war, they drifted from villages to towns and cities.

We failed to find a single oldtime Slonimer who had detailed memories of pre-war life. We were (rightly) chastised for not coming earlier when this one or that one was still alive and could have told us everything.

We did, however, find a woman who was not born in Slonim, but whose inspiration and personality engraved themselves on all three of us for the rest of our lives, and for us, will remain the living spirit of Slonim.

To gentile Slonim she is well known as Anna Bursevitch, a brave former partisan whose light coloring enabled her to sneak into Slonim from the nearby forests in the days of Nazi slaughter, and obtain food and medicines for the partisans. And, as a trained nurse, she saved many partisan lives. Much of a wall of the town's museum is dedicated to her bravery.

But to us, she reverted in a split second to her native Yiddish, and to her native name, Chana (CHA-neh) Zlotnitsky. And here, in brief, is her story, translated into English.

"I was born in Suvalk. My mother was a *hefterke* (embroiderer) and — a revolutionary. But her *zeyde* (grandfather) was a pious ritual slaughterer, and in the old days the ritual slaughterer had to be a very learned man who had studied in the famous yeshiva of Brisk. Grandfather came home from the prayerhouse one Sabbath and caught my mother reading a Russian book. "Sorra-Golda, you're praying from the prayerbook?" he asked sarcastically and slapped her.

"Her grandfather had the usual 'cure' for this 'disease,' a quick forced marriage with the right religious man. And, my mother's grandfather, the esteemed ritual slaughterer, found a rich family, the Zlotnitskys. One of the Zlotnisky boys was dumb, couldn't speak a word, and that was the match for my mother, can you imagine? Benyomin was his name. His brother, Shmuel, lived in Berlin, and another brother Dovid, in America. Shmuel was already married, his father-in-law was a banker. Shmuel came to

Brisk. He was very handsome and rich. My mother Sorra-Golda really liked him, and thought her bridegroom — this man's brother — would be like him. She was very beautiful. The dumb groom turned up. He was also handsome, he touched her hand. "But *Zeyde,* my mother complained, he can't speak a word!" Grandfather reassured her that because of his wealth everything would turn out for the best. In the end, my mother was not altogether happy. Her cunning relatives knew how to siphon off the wealth, she was left with five difficult children (I am one of them) and one dumbman for a husband, and that took everything out of her. Her sisters made off with big dowries for Israel in the 1930s.

"When my father, who couldn't speak died, my mother joined her sisters and other relatives in Palestine in 1938. One of her sisters died, and her brother-in-law proposed to her, and they remarried and lived happily ever after. Well, not quite, you can't live happily ever after knowing or thinking that all your children have been murdered. And this takes me to the crux of my story, well, almost.

"When the Germans invaded their 'part' in 1939, I fled from Suvalk, which was close to the German sector, to deeper into the Russian sector, and ended up here in Slonim. I was in the ghetto for ten months, and then escaped to the partisans to become a nurse, and was able to sneak in and out past the German lines because of my 'Aryan' appearance, ha! Two years I lived in the forest, and like the others, never received a penny compensation, but don't think I'm interested in money, I need money for one very special reason. Be patient, ok?

"After the war I married a Belorussian whom I fell in love with in the forest. He was an editor of a newspaper here in Slonim. Here, let me show you my fourteen medals.

"I lost just about everybody who had remained behind here in Europe. Chaim, one of my four brothers, who had joined the Polish Army in 1939, died somewhere in a prisoner of war camp. Leizer died in the German ghetto, in Raigrod not far from Byalistok. I went there right after liberation and said: "Leizer, you used to meet me here but now you lie in the ground." Yude died on the front, he joined the Red Army, became a lieutenant, came

back but left again to fight against the Nazis. Motke, the youngest had gone to our mother in Israel where he died several years ago.

"Thank you for listening. Now I come to my real story. Right after the war, before the Soviet Union cut off all contacts with the outside world, I managed to find out my mother's address in Jerusalem. I wrote to her: "Mother, I am writing to you from you from the grave of our people. I cannot tell you how many times I have been in the grave. But only I alone, your Chanka, have remained alive from anyone. Mother, I am here, we will meet again!"

"In my letter to my mother, I told her about the good man I had married, and of course, the details of the three brothers who perished.

"The NKVD [forerunner of the KGB] intercepted the letter in Slonim, my husband was summoned to their local office here. "Do you know your wife writes letters to Israel? You realize that you don't have to be the editor of this newspaper!"

"All those years I had to live with my growing sin, that I was allowing my mother to get old and die in Israel without knowing that her daughter Chanka survives in Slonim. Several years ago, after things opened up, my brother in Israel found me through the Red Cross. My brother had overheard a conversation about partisans in the Slonim area and interrupted, asking if anyone ever saw his sister Chana Zlotnitsky. He showed them the picture he always carried around in his wallet.

"My brother got in touch with me and told me that mother had died in 1964, without knowing that I survived. He sent me the exact location of her grave in Jerusalem. I thought seriously about hanging myself right in this room.

"But then I remembered that I *do* believe in God. After all those Soviet years, you have to remind yourself what you believe in. And I decided that there is one more mission in life for me before I die, which is not a long time from now, I'm a very sick woman, I only look strong and energetic.

"I decided I must go to Jerusalem to my mother's grave to beg her forgiveness and then I can die right then and there. I've

been asking left and right, to get from this apartment in Slonim to the grave in Jerusalem will cost almost a thousand dollars. Where on earth am I going to get a thousand dollars, my pension, including everything, for working as a nurse all my life and being a decorated war hero, a partisan, comes to thirty-five dollars a month in your money. My three sons would help me if they could, they are honest people, don't drink but they also don't know how to make *beezness*."

In classic Soviet fashion, each of the sofas in the house opens into a bed, and Chana prepares three beds for us to stay over the night, before making our way further south the next morning. But she didn't go to sleep herself, standing by the window guarding the car all night, to be sure it would not be stolen. We spoke all night about how we would together find the thousand dollars for her to go to Israel to visit her mother's grave, and in the age-old Jewish tradition of speaking to departed relatives, explain everything to her mother at the gravesite. Chana would not accept the money we had with us. "What good is it? I need enough to get to my mother's grave or nothing. There isn't a thing more than I need here in Slonim."

I returned to England determined to find the thousand dollars for Chanka to realize her last wish.

As it happened, some weeks after returning to Britain, I had a long-standing lunch appointment in Chalk Farm, London with an old friend, naturopathic teacher and writer Tricia Corob. Being the specialist she is, and being the poor actor I am, she saw that I was troubled about something and asked what it might be. So, I plucked up the courage and told her all about Chana Zlotnitsky of Slonim.

Tricia heard the story, and said: "Look, let me organize a check right now."

"No," I said, "checks are quite useless in Belarus, somebody would have to bring the cash to Chana in Slonim, or alternatively,

and probably better, the tickets would be bought here and hand-delivered to Chana. We'd arrange a driver to take her to the airport in Minsk, we'd arrange for her to be met at Ben Gurion Airport, it's a whole enterprise, helping someone in Belarus, no checks, no charitable status, no western mechanisms. . ."

"No problem," Tricia said, "we'll do it, we must do it!"

We agreed that I would phone Chana in Slonim and get back to Tricia the following day, and we'd proceed to make the arrangements in tandem with Chana. We would both have a part in this *mitsve* (from the biblical Hebrew for "commandment," but in Yiddish a simple good deed).

I telephoned to Belarus all the next day trying to get through to the number I had in Slonim. When I finally succeeded, a woman answered the telephone and told me in Russian that Chana died the day before, quite suddenly.

Some little but permanent part of Chana Zlotnitsky's guilt about not fulfilling her last wish, to visit her mother's grave in Jerusalem, is now also my guilt.

ZHETTEL

Zhettel is a little shtetl with a big history. Situated in the northeastern corner of Grodna gubernia in czarist times, it was near to the borders of Vilna and Minsk gubernias, and reaped the cultural influences from all three provincial capitals: Vilna, Grodna and Minsk.

Its list of famous sons is a long one, starting with Rabbi Simcha Kohen Rapoport who led a successful debate with the false messiah Jacob Frank (1726—1791) and was in effect, the first to publicly expose that impressive charlatan (who had quite a few Christians as well as Jews taken in by his messianic claims). It is characteristic of East European Jewish history that a little David from a small shtetl can take on and best a big-city hotshot.

Wolf Segal, a famous legal authority who was rabbi of Zhettel, was once called upon to settle a business dispute between two traveling German Jews. He impressed them both so much with his brilliance, that they forgot their dispute and teamed up to bring him home with them to be rabbi in their town.

The Chofetz-Chaim of Radin was actually born in Zhettel and only moved to Radin after being married to a girl from Radin. So, Zhettelites continue to claim him as one of their own.

Another native son was the legendary *Dubner magid,* the traveling preacher of Dubno, who was born not in Dubno but in Zhettel. His "other" name was Jacob ben Wolf Krantz (1741-1804). This man became the most beloved teller of creative parables who could hold audiences spellbound. The austere Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797), it is told, did not have time to meet his own sister when she came a long way to see him, because a social meeting with her would detract from the time spent learning (he told her they would have plenty of time to make it all up in the world to come). But when he was (as even a Gaon of Vilna can be) ill or depressed, he would summon the *Dubner magid* to come and cheer him up with rabbinic humor.

Zhettel was also famous for its three charming studyhouses. It had not only a *nayer bismédresh* ("new studyhouse") and an *alter bismédresh* ("old studyhouse"), like so many shtetls, but its unique pride was the *míteler bismédresh* ("middle studyhouse").

Before the war, the population of Zhettel was estimated at 4,400, comprising four hundred Christians and four thousand Jews. The Jews were nearly all murdered by the Nazis.

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Driving south from Lida we passed a town called Diatlava, and, having developed a sense for what was or was not once a Jewish shtetl, we started asking around in town, and were told that there was one Jew in town called Kaplan, and he lived at the beginning of Frunze Street. This is another frequent Soviet street name that crops up all over the place, named for Michail Vasilyevich Frunze, (1885-1925), one of the founders of the Red Army.

Our host is a cheerful fellow who quickly informs us that we are in Zhettel! We had not associated Diatlava with Zhettel.

"I'm called Avremke Kaplan," he tells us cheerfully. "I come from a long line of *Zhettler* on both my father's and mother's side. For generations the family was in the linen business. The *karabélnikes,* who traveled through the villages with their horse and wagon, would buy up raw linen from the peasants, and we knew how to make all sorts of finished goods from the stuff."

He tells us about life before the war, and his favorite childhood hero, the town musician, Aryeh der klezmer, who lived to be one hundred years old (and thankfully died before the Holocaust).

Like all the other Jews who stayed behind, Avremke and his family was incarcerated in the ghetto, a small section of town cordoned off, fenced off and guarded by German guards, overpopulated by a Jewish population from the entire area, subject

to humiliation, hunger, disease and increasing awareness that mass murder for nothing but race was to be their fate.

But Avremke cannot hate all Germans. He remembers a good German who came to eat in his home (the very house we are sitting in now, and the very table) during the first few days of the occupation, in the last days of June 1941. His mother had seen this German soldier standing in front of the house, and she invited him in to eat. As in many other places, the Germans were welcomed by older Jews who remembered the German army of World War I. The German turned to his parents, Yankel and Leya, and said: "Look I shouldn't be telling you this but the SS have a plan to kill each and every Jew, here and everywhere. So when the time comes, you'll know it, and remember to think of something, okay? There's always something to think up when you know what is in store."

Even after many months of incarceration in the town's ghetto, numerous deportations, slave labor and some gratuitous killings, the town's Jews didn't believe that they would *all* be shot. "Normal people," explains Avremke, "Don't consider such a possibility. What on earth did the cobblers, tailors and rabbis of Zhettel do to the Germans?"

But the Kaplans never forgot the German soldier's words, and after the first major *Aktion*, at the beginning of May 1942, when 2,800 of the ghetto's six thousand inhabitants (including those from nearby locations brought to the Zhettel ghetto) were taken away, the Kaplans "thought of something."

They dug a big underground "room" called a *skhron* and fashioned a wooden ceiling covered by a thin layer of earth and grass, with pipes and vents for ventilation. Over the opening that led to their hiding place, they erected what looked like an old outhouse. They even constructed a fake wooden toilet to make it look perfect, in the event it was inspected. It was in fact made of old boards taken from a crumbling shack. They worked at night and slept inside it by day.

The remaining thousands of Jews were taken to a big pit and shot on August 6th 1942. Except for the fifteen Kaplans hidden

under the ground. Of the few still alive, only one, Avremke Kaplan, still lives in Zhettel.

For two days and two nights they tried not to move, gripped by a horror that Avremke says he cannot describe. The shots and cries from the mass grave site were within earshot. For hours on end they heard cries of "Shma Yisroel" ("Hear O Israel, God is our God, God is one" from the Bible), the traditional last words of Jews being murdered, before "sanctifying the name of God" would have it, as encapsulated by the Hebrew-origin Yiddish verb *mekádesh hashém zayn* (to sanctify the name, to go to one's death for one's faith in the God of Israel).

"Try to imagine," Avremke says, "the horror of one person or ten people being murdered. Then think of listening to the murder of three thousand people, from infants to the most aged."

After the two nights, the Kaplans fled the deserted and unguarded ghetto grounds in the middle of the night, and made it to the hamlet Nákreshik, where good people, Russians and Poles, helped them and fed them.

For nearly two more years, the Kaplans lived in the nearby forest, until the Soviet army returned and drove out the Germans in July 1944.

After the war, Avremke was given a job as a driver for the local education system, bringing supplies of whatever was needed, from books to furniture, to the schools in the region.

On a walk about town, he shows us entire streets that have not changed at all in appearance. The crooked windows facing in every direction make a classic shtetl scene. Only the inhabitants are all new.

A lot of the old Jewish cemetery survives, it feels almost like an eerie crowd of people, which each stone weathered and tilting in its own special way. The men's names are, as usual, all in their classical (usually biblical) forms, giving only a range of possibilities for the real everyday names in Yiddish. The women's stones blossom with rich local Yiddish names, including Minke, Yitl, Hanye, Itke, Feige, Shulke, Dvoshe, Tille, Radke, Slavve, all once

every day names that seem so far from modern Jewish women's names.

Asked about his life, Avremke tells us he can make ends meet only thanks to his brother Mottel in New York, also a survivor of the underground hideout. Mottel owns an electric shop somewhere in Manhattan and sends Avremke some help each month. Unlike western families, where there is often embarrassment about needing help from well-to-do relatives, Avremke boasts about his brother's generosity in the authentic tradition of the East European shtetl. "You see this television? Its thanks to my brother in New York! And this electric shaver? From my brother in New York!" His Yiddish rendition of "New York" is the very old fashioned *NEV-york,* which is not heard much nowadays.

Avremke is married to a charming Belorussian woman. Both their grown daughters are married to Belorussian army officers. The wife whispers to us: "Look, I'm a proud Belorussian but it would make Avremke so happy if at least one of them got divorced and remarried a Jewish fellow from America or Israel. If you know someone for them, just let me know, leave the whole divorce business to me, it will be taken care of in ten minutes."

*

On one visit to Zhettel, with Minsk filmmaker Yuri Gorulov, we attempted to film the one surviving former synagogue, which happens to have been the famed *míteler bismédresh.* It is now a fire station. A group of Belorussian soldiers surround us and tell us to surrender the film, because filming "strategic objects" such as fire stations is still illegal (or to be more exact, again illegal, or at least again enforced). Gorulov starts a spirited argument with the soldiers.

"What kind of strategic object! One broken down fire engine, look the back wheel is missing. Your strategic object is a derelict former synagogue building with the front doors ripped off! Come on now! Anyway, who said it's a strategic object?

One of the soldiers, not in the mood for joshing or arguing, replied tersely.

"Well, Yuri Nikolayevich," he said, staring into Gorulov's identity papers, "Alexander Grigorivich said it!" referring to the president of Belarus, and contrasting the two Russian middle-name-patronymics, thereby contrasting the greatest power in the country with this powerless insubordinate film director.

"You can give us the film, Yuri Nikolayevich, or we will arrest you and confiscate the cameras as well. Say, who is this foreigner with you?"

I poked my elbow into Yuri: "Give it to him" and we were all allowed to go free. In something out of Chaplain's *The Great Dictator,* Gorulov insists on registering a complaint with the chief of police of Zhettel, who stared at us as Gorulov was holding forth on being a major documentary film director. After a moment's silence, the chief of police gave our party "ten minutes" to leave town. Gorulov's assistant and I persuaded him to leave and we all made for the prairies.

PRUZHAN

Pruzhan is one of the famous Jewish villages in the area of the city Brisk, or to use its full traditional name, Brisk d'Lita ("Brisk of Lithuania" corresponding with former Brest-Litovsk, interwar Brzesc in Poland, now Brest in Belarus). Like many Jewish townlets, Pruzhan's name too has several forms, and each of them forms part of a "sound series" with another town. Traveling from Brisk to Slonim you pass Pruzhan (proo-ZHAN) and then Ruzhan (roo-ZHAN) on the old track to Slonim (passing on the way Seltz or Selitz, where the Gaon of Vilna was born, but that is another story). Some called it Pruzhene (PROO-zhenne), in which case the next town must be called Ruzhene (ROO-zhenne). To keep matters simple, we will refer to the place as Pruzhan, with no implications as to what is correct, because they are, of course, the splendid variegated products of natural language, and therefore, all correct.

The Jewish heritage of Pruzhan goes back at the very least to the early fifteenth century. In the case of almost all such datings of Jewish life in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, the real beginnings are much older. Historians are at the mercy of what records happen to survive, and records of a Jewish community from bygone centuries, and the first evidence of official, documented synagogue or cemetery construction do not by any means imply that it was at that instant that a Yiddish speaking society was landed by spaceship. There is inevitably a long prehistory that remains unknown, sometimes wrapped in legend. During the Holocaust many of these legends were lost.

Pruzhan's documented history includes construction of a synagogue in 1463, and some years before that, of a *khévre kadíshe* (Jewish burial and funeral society). But Pruzhan is best known as the seat of centuries of internationally known rabbinic geniuses. Among those who served the town as rabbis are two of the greatest commentators on the Code of Jewish Law (the *Shúlkhen órukh* or *Shulhán arúch*). They are the *Taz* and the *Bach*, as both are

known by every yeshiva student in the world today. These acronyms derive, like the Chofets-Chaim's in Radin, from their beloved works. The *Taz* (the name comes from his commentary *Túrey Zóhov* "Columns of Gold") was "in everyday life" Dovid ben Shmuel ha-Leyvi who was born in the Ukraine in 1586 and died in Lemberg (Lvov, now Lviv) in 1667. The second (though chronologically the first) was his father in law *the Bakh* (from his masterpiece *Báyis Khódosh* "New House"), Yoyel (Joel) Sirkes (1561—1640). Sirkes was a modernist who ideas would alarm many of today's strictly orthodox Jews. He allowed for the reading of secular books for enjoyment on the Sabbath, saw nothing wrong with listening to a woman singing or even in using church melodies in synagogue if their beauty was (to use an anachronism), non-denominational. In recent generations, Pruzhan is known as the home of the renowned Soloveitchik family of great rabbis and scholars.

So, this is one town with *yikhes* (proud pedigree).

*

We found two remaining elderly Jewish families in Pruzhan. Among them there is only one *ríkhtiker Pruzháner* (proper Pruzhaner). He is Yudel Nitzberg whose biography is a microcosm of the horrors of the twentieth century. In short:

The man was born in 1920, when (despite what you read in the history books about World War I having ended in 1918) Poles and Russians were butchering each other (and whatever stood in between) before the area settled down to Polish rule in the early 1920s (the Soviets didn't get to take their revenge until September 1939, when they took these parts, allotted to them under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact).

The horrors of World War I (which we would all still be talking about had there been no Holocaust), and the near-starvation poverty it caused, were very much alive in all kind of ways among the Jewish families of the area (especially the Jewish

families because of the excesses perpetrated by the Polish legionnaires during their conquest of the area, and the rapid steps taken to "break Jewish monopolies" even where there were none).

Still, by the early 1930s life seemed again to settle down, and this man's father earned a steady if modest income from repairing roof tiles and fixing thatched roofs. "In other words, he was an all around roofman." As to life in general, Yudel sums it up with a voice full of yearning:

> "S'geven a sakh yidn, s'geven fraylakh, a yidishe shtot" [There were many Jews, it was happy, it was a Jewish town].

Yudel recalls that the atmosphere for Jews got a lot worse after the death of interwar Poland's founding leader Marshall Jozef Pilsudski in May 1935. Antisemitism and pro-Nazism, previously checked, became rampant, and daily life took on an air of insecurity.

The Soviet takeover in September 1939 put antisemitism in check again, but at the expense of the closing down of most of traditional Jewish life, to which Yudel had always been attached. He cannot understand why great power like the Soviet Union should have cared about the operations of rabbis, synagogues, yeshivas and houses of learning.

Shortly after the Nazi occupation, in August 1941, Yudel and his family were incarcerated in the Pruzhan ghetto, which was "officially" set up on September 22nd 1941. Because of the exceptional productivity of the workshops which the Jews worked out round the clock in the hope of averting death, the ghetto was more or less "kept" until 1943 when the "Judenrat" or Jewish Ghetto Council was caught collaborating with the Jewish partisans in the forests. In the last days of January 1943, the Germans started deporting about 2,500 Pruzhan Jews a day to Auschwitz. Like many other "centralized ghettoes" the Pruzhan ghetto included Jews from many other places too, leading to a far greater number of Jews than had lived in the town before the war (when the Jewish population was just over four thousand, more than half the population).

Yudel Nitzberg and his family were deported to Auschwitz in those freezing final days of January 1943. "There were seventy to eighty people in each cattle car of the train, and between ten and fifteen had died of suffocation by the time the train arrived at Auschwitz. Maybe they were the lucky ones. But who is to know who is lucky?"

There his arm was branded, without anesthetic, with the number 98987. "Even in the winter I always wear short sleeves under my jacket and coat," he explains, holding out his arm for our camera, "so I don't forget my family for one single moment."

"At Auschwitz, all the new arrivals were divided, we to the left and the non-laborers, mostly older people, to the right. Around sixty percent were gassed right away and their bodies then burned, a much better fate than was to come upon my family.

"During my two years and three months at Auschwitz I saw my whole family burned alive in the crematorium, not having been gassed first."

He remembers the dates of their "living cremations" very vividly, staring with his sister Guta (born 1923) three months after arrival in Auschwitz and ending with his older brother Yoske (born 1915) in 1944. In between, he witnessed the burnings of his father Meishe, his mother Bluma, and his little sister Iditshka (born in 1930).

In 1945, Yudel was the only one left of his family, his friends, his circle of acquaintances. When the Russians were getting close, the fleeing Germans forced him on the infamous Death Marches. He was in a group driven by foot to Sachsenhausen. Any who fell from fatigue, or even slipped were shot on sight. After a month there, the Germans drove this group onward to Bergen Belsen, where most were shot. Yudel survived it all by some miracle and, after two months in Bergen Belsen, seriously ill, he and the other survivors were liberated by British and American troops on April 15th 1945.

Turning down offers of migration to Britain or America, Yudel returned to his native Pruzhan to keep alive the memory of

his wiped-out people, and to be close to the graves of his ancestors.

His uncle, Simcha Goldin, then in Philadelphia, sent him a few food package, and on those grounds, he was arrested by the Stalinist regime and sentenced to ten years hard labor. "I was lucky" says this (perhaps?) most unlucky of people, "I only served seven years."

His seven years were served in northwestern Russia, is the region of Archangelsk (formerly Molotovsk), at hard labor in timber production. "Much better than Siberia in the far east, believe you me" he says, always seeing something merciful in his fate.

After *those* seven years, his life, at long last, began to take on some semblance of normalcy. He married a Jewish woman from Minsk, Tsila (Tsipka), who came to Pruzhan to live with him. He is proud of her housekeeping talents in balancing the meager budget and keeping the tiny Soviet flat spotless.

They had a beautiful baby daughter, who was run over and killed in a car accident at the age of five.

The years went by, Yudel worked as a housepainter, and during the long Brezhnev years, there was again a period of stability and just getting on with things, accepting the past as the past, and feeling privileged to be a frequent visitor and spiritual keeper of the remnants of the cemetery, and of the single synagogue building that remains standing of the seven that thrived before the war. Yudel takes us there, asks to be photographed near the building, remembering it's traditional name *Beys Yánkev* (House of Jacob).

He recalls that before the war every shade of modern Jewish life flourished alongside the traditional, including the usual gamut of Hebraists, Yiddishists, Zionists, Bundists, and more. Of all their buildings, only one stands, that of the pre-war "modern traditionalist religious" faction *Yavne*. Of the larger Jewish shops, he shows us "Rakover's krom." The building looks pretty much as it did before the war, except for its dilapidation and its makeshift Soviet-era repairs. He feels most hopeless about the remains of the

old Jewish cemetery. "It is being taken apart to this very day, stone by stone, what can I do, stand there and fight them all off?"

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And then the Soviet Union collapsed, and Yudel's and Tsipa's saved rubles, carefully hidden in all kinds of corners of the house for old age after a half century of toil and frugality, suddenly became worthless.

With old age came a host of respiratory illnesses. While basic medical care is still free in Belarus, the cost of foreign medicines is now "at cost price," not very accessible on a pension that comes to around twenty dollars a month. And so Yudel Nitzberg, survivor of the Pruzhan Ghetto, Auschwitz and the Death Marches, keeper of the memory of Jewish life for half a century in his shtetl, must live his last years in pain, agony and the humiliation of poverty. He received a one-time only "compensation gift" of twelve hundred deutschmarks, and had to sign a piece of paper that he has no further claims in order to receive that.

While the American lawyers rake in millions administering all sorts of Holocaust committees, campaigns and conventions, the Yudel Nitzbergs die in pain and the humiliation of poverty.

In a long frank talk, we asked Yudel to take twenty-four hours and think about the following question:

What would he, and others like him, need in income supplements, to live well in Belarus today?

Yudel, smiling for the first time, promises to work it out very carefully and have his answer ready the next day.

When we return from Brisk to hear the answer, Yudel offers it with the confidence of a western specialist who has been on a commission studying the matter for years.

Yudel Nitzberg knows that other ghetto and camp survivors like himself often don't like the word "survivor" used about those who fled to Russia or joined the Red Army or even those who hid in the forests. He knows that one of the formal definitions includes the requirement that the victim have lived under Nazi administration on Nazi occupied territory. Yudel is not a petty man, he says, and thinks it is absolutely rubbish to start processes of distinguishing categories of survivors and semi-survivors, "when we will all soon be dead, buried and forgotten" as he puts it, head lowered.

Where does that leave us?

"I will tell you," Yudel says. "My opinion is that all the Jews who lived continuously (except perhaps the war years) on the territory occupied by the Third Reich and that became part of the Soviet empire be awarded a pension of one hundred dollars per month per family. That would solve everything."

"Nitzberg's formula" appeared in an op-ed piece in the English language *Forward* in September 1999. Not one of the major American Jewish organizations reacted.

But a few individuals, all for sure, *lamed-vóvnikes* (members of the proverbial thirty-six good people in whose merit the world continues), have been risking five and ten dollar bills each month, even without a tax exempt charity status organization to which to make out a check.

Too late, now, alas, for Yudel Nitzberg who recently died.

SVINTSYAN

"I have simply resolved to forget about my date of birth. If I waste time thinking about that," Blumka Katz adds, with the intonation of the classic *Litvak* of Yiddish folklore who has no time for the little things, "when in the world would I ever get anything done?"

Frail, poor, thoroughly intellectual, and pushing ninety, Blumka Katz lives out her days (as a matter of non-negotiable principle) in the shtetl of her ancestors, devoting her unstoppable energy to teaching, lecturing and writing about pre-Holocaust Yiddish civilization.

Elegantly petit with broadish shoulders, and a voice whose boom is the feminine answer to the authoritative yet affectionate tones of a rabbinic scholar of old Lithuania, Blumka is equally beloved by Jews, Lithuanians, Russians and Poles in the area, for her learning and her passion for singlehandedly striving to preserve a culture. She is also a sort of non-denominational minister. People of many beliefs (and none) come to her to ask her advice in difficult situations. They always leave her two-room Soviet era apartment with the satisfied look of those who have benefited from rarefied wisdom.

Her life is a virtual microcosm of the history of modern Yiddish culture in its homeland: early growth amid turmoil, meteoric achievement, unfathomable annihilation by history's most horrific campaign of genocide, and stubborn determination to continue to live and to build, seemingly against all the odds. Blumka is on the most spiritual kind of high when speaking, reading, writing or even thinking about Yiddish. And it is that ebullience within her than has inspired dozens of younger Jews (and non-Jews) to the study of Yiddish language, and of its literature and culture.

She would no doubt find soul-mates in New York, Montreal or Amherst. But in her shtetl Svintsyan (svin-TZYAN), about an

hour's drive northeast of Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, she is, as she puts it, "among the Last of the Mohicans." The other four Jews here are understandably preoccupied with making the inadequate pension check last out the month.

Blumka welcomes Jews from abroad seeking their roots, gives talks to local schoolchildren, leads walking tours and has been writing extensively (in Yiddish, of course) to transmit her memories — and her hopes — to new generations.

Several months before she was born in Vilna, on New Year's Eve of 1914 (or maybe 1913), her father, Abbe-Zelig Katz, a Svintsyaner by birth, left for America. He was never heard from again.

Her brother, Elyokem, who was born in 1912, died of a hunger related disease in 1918. Then her mother, Frumka (whose maiden name, it so happened, was also Katz), lost her job as a dyer in a Vilna textile factory. The war was still raging in Vilna, where Russians, Lithuanians and Poles continued to fight it out long after the departure of the German army. Blumka's earliest memories are of the armies and currency changing all the time, from her vantage point in the yard of an old Jewish streetlet in Vilna called Gitke-Teybe's Zavulik (Gitka the Deaf's lane), which she still visits (it's now Mikalojaus street in the gentrified, expensive, old city of modern day Vilnius).

Frumka decided to take little Blumka to her missing husband's hometown Svintsyan (not far from her own native Gavikén, further north).

Blumka remembers her "reverse migration" from city to shtetl very well. "Whenever we went uphill, my mother had to get out and walk alongside the wagon. The wagoners (*bal-agóles*) were not known for their courtesy, and ours, called Meishke Zhulik (Meishke the Scoundrel) kept calling me "you little witch."

Around 1920, little Blumka's favorite spot in Svintsyan became a strip of wood-planked sidewalk on a street called *Kaznatsheystver gas,* outside the window of the newly established Yiddish secular school (set up by Vilna's *Tsentráler bíldungs-komitét* — Central Education Committee — known as the "Tseh-beh-ka" for short; this abbreviation comes from the Slavic names of the letters corresponding to the Yiddish sounds, one of the many cross-cultural syntheses of the period).

She would listen with envy to the lessons inside. Barefooted and still nourished by the bread-with-straw mix common during the war, she saw little hope of admission. The other children came from more comfortable homes where parents could pay at least nominal tuition.

Blumka talked her best friend Chaika, also six, into joining her, and together they plucked up courage to speak to the head teacher on the street one day. "So, you want to study, eh?" answered Dveira Fisher, a silver haired woman. Convinced by the girls' sincerity, she told them to turn up the next morning, and arranged two pairs of shoes, so they would not feel any different from the others. Like other poor children in town, Blumka and Chaika went barefoot in the summer months, and wore *vólikes,* thick woolen socks, still quite common among East Europe's village poor, during the winter.

The new Yiddish school in Svintsyan grew into a seven-grade primary school. Blumka became its top pupil, and after graduating, enrolled in its sister institution, the Svintsyan Yiddish *gimnázye* (secondary school).

Then, in 1929, the Polish government's educational authorities closed down the school on a legal pretext. "What really happened," Blumka explains, was that the Polish government had decided to aggressively pursue a policy of culturally and linguistically assimilating the Jews, to turn us into "proper Poles of the Mosaic faith."

Determined to pursue her secular Yiddish education through to the highest levels, Blumka moved down to Vilna and plunged into the rarefied exuberance of some of the top creators of modern secular Yiddish culture.

Vilna in the late 1920s had become the international center of High Yiddish Culture, the interface of magnificently talented scholars, educators, and — poets. Max Weinreich, Zalmen Reyzen, Zelig-Heersh Kalmanovitsh were among the top researchers who had settled in Vilna and, in 1925, established the Yiddish Scientific institute, known by its Yiddish acronym YIVO (*Yídisher vísnshaftlekher institút*). Master Yiddish poet and mystic novelist Meishe Kulbak was in the vanguard of the group of young poets. They were eventually joined by Blumka's contemporary, Avrom Sutzkever, who is today (in Tel Aviv) considered the world's leading Yiddish poet.

Blumka was accepted as a student at the *Vilner yídisher lérer-seminár,* the Vilna Yiddish Teachers' Seminary. "I was right smack in the middle of *ganéydn,*" she reminisces, using the Yiddish word for "paradise."

"The Teachers' Seminary was located at Azheshkova Street no. 7, in the same courtyard as the official Jewish community, a Yiddish primary school, the Hebrew Teachers' Seminary, and the An-ski Museum."

Blumka soon fell in love with another young aspiring Yiddish teacher, Shimke Yavitsh (a distant relative of New York's late senator Jacob Javits; all the bona fide Yavitzes, Yavitshes, Javitses, and so forth, go back to the acronym Yaavets, the rabbinic name of Reb Yankev ben Tsvi, better known as Jacob Emden (1697—1776), a great scholar and campaigner against the followers of the celebrated false messiah Sabbethai Zevi.

Blumka and Shimke swore eternal love and planned to marry.

"I'll never forget when our teacher, Gurland, asked to meet discreetly with Shimke and myself in the city's central park to discuss something "delicate." We turned up excited. Gurland got right to the point: "You know the new pupil, that fellow Sutzkever from Smargon? Well, he has incredible talent to become a great Yiddish poet, but he never had the chance to learn to write correctly. Will one of you take him aside and quietly help him. I don't want there to be any embarrassment in front of the others, okay?"

Blumka's fiancé took the matter in hand. "Shimke would quietly turn up at Sutzkever's room on *Kleyn Shnipeshik* and they would study Yiddish grammar for hours. Sutzkever became a master not only of poetry but of Yiddish grammatical usage and stylistics.

What does Blumka remember of the young Abraham Sutzkever besides his talent?

"His camera. He didn't go anywhere without it and in fact made his very modest living from the pictures he took and developed himself. And by the way, Abrashke, as we all called Sutzkever back then, never had that moustache with which he became so famous after the war, as far as I can tell from all the photographs."

Blumka speaks often about Max Weinreich (1894—1969), the preeminent Yiddish linguist of the century now best known for his *History of the Yiddish Language* (the four volume Yiddish edition appeared in New York in 1973, and the English translation in 1980).

"In September 1930, the Yiddish Teachers' Seminary director, Avrom Golomb told us the good news. Max Weinreich was becoming a full-time teacher and would introduce Yiddish Philology into our curriculum.

"There was electricity in the air when he made his appearance in our classroom. A handsome dark-haired man, whose head always tilted slightly upward. He walked with quick paced steps. He would look us over with his penetrating gaze, calling out each student's family name from the class journal before getting down to work. He never digressed from the day's topic. The only exception was Yivo. If there was a cause to mention the Yivo, he would override the day's topic and tell us how important it was to support the future of the institution dedicated to the development of Yiddish as a living, vibrant culture.

"In his personal life he was a pedant. He would decide things quickly and without discussion. When one of the seminary students was invited to work at his home on 14 Pohulanka Street

as a research assistant, and he was paying by the hour, he made sure that the student worked not a minute more not a minute less. We always enjoyed meeting his beautiful red-haired wife Regina and his two little boys, Uriel and Gabi, who would disappear soon after we came." (Uriel Weinreich went on to become a leading Yiddish and general theoretical linguist in America; he wrote *College Yiddish* in the late 1940s, and completed the manuscript of his *English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* before his untimely death in 1967.)

"You must remember," Blumka adds with mock sternness, "that we students in the Vilna Yiddish Teachers' Seminary were not like students at one of your universities today. The typical student's daily diet was one herring and a slice of black bread, and — an endless supply of tea. We used to kid around about the number of herrings each of us had to go until graduation day, 370 or 580 say, until our life's dream would be realized and we would graduate and be able to teach in our beloved Yiddish language."

But it all came crashing down when the Polish government closed down the Vilna Yiddish Teachers Seminary in 1932.

"When they had closed down our *gimnázye* in Svintsyan back in 1929, the pretext had been ownership of the building. But now, in closing the premier institution of higher Yiddish learning, the regime offered a much more ominous reason. They regarded our Yiddish college as a hotbed of subversive communism. There was some revolving truth here. The more anti-Semitic and intolerant the regime became, the more we students were in fact attracted to communism. Our beloved teachers, the poet Meishe Kulbak and the literary historian Max Erik had already left Vilna for the Soviet Union. The Russians' propaganda on the radio said that the Soviet Union was an egalitarian society where race or religion didn't matter."

Blumka remembers very vividly the farewell banquet for Kulbak on the eve of his migration to Minsk, in October 1928. "He was only emigrating a few hundred miles to the east, but a world away, across the then closed and hostile Pólish-Soviet frontier. As the evening wore on, it was becoming more and more

"felt" in the hall that none of us would ever see him again, and before it was all over, the sensitive Yiddish poet had fainted."

Blumka, her dream of qualifying as a Yiddish teacher abruptly blown up, returned to her mother's in Svintsyan in 1932. She taught Hebrew and other subjects privately to the children of a well-to-do family there. In 1933, she returned to Vilna and studied Polish and Hebrew at Dr. Tsharno's Teachers' Seminary. "The main Hebrew teacher there was called Taubenfligel. It was the first time in my life I heard the very weird Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew. What can I tell you, it just had none of the magic for me of our Yiddish teachers' seminary."

She had, moreover, lost her fiancé. Shimke Yavitsh, repeatedly arrested on suspicion of communism, could take no more and had illegally crossed the Polish-Soviet border in 1932, promising to send for Blumka as soon as possible. "Little did I know," she muses with a wry half-smile, "that my Shimke was already languishing in a Soviet slave labor camp on suspicion of being a Polish spy. But they let him go. He started writing me love letters again, like every young man writes to his beloved, you see. I was the only thing in the world my mother had but, as I see it now, I committed a terrible crime against my mother. I left her alone and snuck across the border with Yavitsh's older brother Chaim. That was in May of 1935."

Blumka met up with Shimke in Magnitogorsk. They got married and she gave birth to a daughter in 1936, and named her Lutzia.

Why Lutzia?

"Had it been a boy, we would have named him *Revo*. And a girl, *Lutzia*. That's how crazed with communism we had become. We couldn't have had more loyal immigrants!"

But in 1937, various friends and neighbors, especially those who, like Blumka and Shimke, had come from "bourgeois Poland," were being arrested "right and left."

"On the night of October 28th, they arrested my Shimke. It took me time to find out where he was imprisoned. When I found out on November 12th, I rushed to the prison to tell the director

that an awful mistake had been made, that Shimke was a loyal and honest communist.

"The man laughed at me and asked my address.

"I waited outside the prison for twenty-four hours. I returned home brokenhearted on the 13th."

And that night, they came for Blumka.

"Three men and a woman barged in. The woman started putting my clothes up against herself as if to measure everything on her own figure. It was a kind of introductory mental torture. She slowly made her way to my baby, Lutzia, who was sleeping. "Don't! You'll wake her up," I said. She laughed and said that that was exactly what she was intending to do."

Blumka was carted away to the women's division of the local prison and told of her crime:

"You are charged according to Article 58, no. 14 of the criminal code. Your husband, Yavitsh, is a counter-revolutionary. You knew about it and failed to inform the NKVD."

Blumka refused to sign the confession put in front of her and was put through a long series of tortures, starting with what the Russians called *stoika* (standing in one spot for up to four days). "There were six of us in a room. When someone fell, the interrogator would pour a bucket of ice water on her, kick her hard, and tell her to get up."

After two months of torture, Blumka was sentenced to many years of hard labor for her "counter-revolutionary activities." She was sent from one prison to another in 1937 and 1938, and then on to Kolyma, in the freezing Soviet northeast, for a decade of hard labor cutting trees down in the Siberian forests. "It was not far from your Alaska," she remarks, her head shaking up and down with a bemused Yiddish half-smile.

Blumka never saw her husband again. Shimke Yavitsh was shot soon after his arrest. Their daughter Lutzia was sent to special schools for "children of enemies of the people" throughout her youth. She was so successfully brainwashed there that she will to this day have almost nothing to do with Blumka.

In the late 1940s, Blumka met her second husband, Kalmen Segalovitsh (1914—2001), also a Vilna native who heard all the good news about the Soviet dreamland on the radio, and snuck across the border. He too was sentenced to hard labor, in the men's section of the same slave labor camp in Kolyma. They met by chance and got married after their release.

In the lunatic asylum of the twentieth century, Stalin's regime had of course saved Blumka from a near certain death in the Holocaust back in Svintsyan, by keeping her, and many other "enemies of the people" in the Soviet far east, far from the German mass murder machine.

Blumka returned to Svintsyan in 1949. It was now known by its Lithuanian name, Švenčionys, and, like Vilnius, was in the Lithuanian republic of the USSR. In czarist times, Svintsyan was in the heart of Vilna province. Between the wars, it was part of Poland. When Stalin took eastern Poland in September 1939, and gave Vilnius to the Lithuanians in October, Svintsyan was allocated to the Belorussian S.S.R., but "given" to Lithuania in late 1940 as a gift, after the Lithuanians "voted" in Spring 1940 for all of Lithuania to become a Soviet republic.

Blumka had heard of the Nazi massacres of the Jews while in the Soviet gulag. "But no-one wants to believe that everyone was murdered. There had been close to four thousand Jews in Svintsyan before the war. They and another four thousand from the surrounding area were all shot in October 1941. My mother Frumka was among them."

The mass grave of Svintsyan Jewry lies in the village Jews once called Svintsyanke (Little Svintsyan), about seven miles to the west. The grave pit is long and deep.

"I come every week to the grave, which is also my mother's grave. At it's far end the tree still stands upon which the murderers banged babies' skulls before throwing them into the pit, to save ammunition. The large number of skulls left quite an indentation in the tree's trunk. The tree's scar is just as visible today."

Blumka retrained as a nurse, and worked during the long Soviet decades at the local hospital until she was in her late seventies.

"As the Yiddish saying goes," Blumka says, *az m'lebt derlebt men!* (If you only live, you live to see what it is you waited for).

"Miracles happen. After fifty years of enslavement, first physical and then spiritual and political, I have had an incredible decade. I retired. Gorbachov came to power. We were suddenly free to talk about the Holocaust, Yiddish, anything we wanted. A new democratic independent Lithuania was in the making, and I could get to work!"

What work?

Blumka's first priority was to find witnesses to the murders of Jews in all the smaller killing sites around Svintsyan. She searched out peasants who had seen the grizzly shootings of men, women, children and used her powers of persuasion to convince the local mayors to put up monuments at each of them.

Then she started a campaign to save the old Jewish cemetery from further vandalism. She enlisted the principals of the local schools in her campaign to recruit schoolchildren to keep the cemetery clean and tidy.

One of her more controversial campaigns was to dismantle a Nazi-made building made of Jewish gravestones, with the lettering showing. Many thought that the building, near the center of town, was the most vivid living proof of what had happened. But Blumka, who thought it was a desecration of the dead whose tombstones these were, had her way with the town council, and the stones were recast into a monument of sorts right inside the entranceway to the old Jewish cemetery, where many hundreds of stones still stand.

She started giving talks in the local schools about the Jewish culture of Svintsyan before the war.

And then, in 1991, HIAS offices in New York located a long lost half-brother. After deserting his first family, her father, Abbe-Zelig, moved to Syracuse, New York and had a son in the 1930s. Pharmacist Eddie Katz was thrilled to discover his long lost sister,

whose existence he didn't know about. He sent her a ticket and they had a tearful Syracuse reunion in 1992. "We hugged and hugged and didn't want to let go. And then, I asked to go to the cemetery there to see our father's grave. And there, at the gravesite, I forgave my father and said kaddish."

In the mid 1990s, she visited Israel several times to give talks organized by the dwindling association of Svintsyan natives.

In 1996, she came to open a Yiddish teaching degree program at Oxford, telling the students all about the original one in Vilna. She repeated the performance at the first Yiddish summer course at Vilnius, in 1998, and at the opening of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University in 2001.

"You see how important it is to hang in there! If you would have told me ten years ago that I had a brother who would send me a ticket to come to America, or that seventy-one students of Yiddish would be coming here to Svintsyan to hear me lecture in Yiddish, I would have said that you are a hopeless and incurable dreamer! And down deep, when I meet all those Yiddish students from around the world every summer here, to show them what a shtetl looks like, I feel that my girlhood dream, here in Svintsyan, of one day becoming a Yiddish teacher, has somehow been fulfilled.

Did she ever get in touch with her old Vilna classmate Avrom Sutzkever?

"Well, sort of. When I was in New York in the early 1990s, I was invited to a banquet of a lunch at the home of a prince of a man, Itche Goldberg, editor of *Yidishe kultur* (and what a magazine it is!). We were joking and bantering about various Yiddish writers, when Itche excused himself to make a phone call. A moment later he called me over, and said: Abrashke is on the line. I took the receiver and heard Sutzkever's voice. It hadn't changed one bit. But I was too overwhelmed with emotion to say anything. I hope Abrashke forgives me."

What about the future?

"It would be a calamity if modern Yiddish were allowed to die as a living language in the west, where you have all the freedom

and facilities. You must inspire young people to learn the language thoroughly, from top to bottom, and to pick up where we left off. Yes, my friend, to pick up where we left off."

Does Blumka have any regrets?

"Sure, who doesn't? When I was a little girl, living just down the same street, I live on now, though it had a different name then, Poshmena gas, I once passed Chana Flekser's garden and stole a cucumber, they used to make a living from cumbers, so it wasn't a very nice thing to do. When I go for my daily walk each day, and pass the house, I am reminded of the theft, and feel ashamed."

There are several more Jews in the onetime shtetl Svintsyan (though being a county seat, even in czarist times, its prewar residents would have insisted that Svintsyan is a *shtot,* a city). Few would insist on that now. It has become a backwater with very little of anything beside Soviet apartment houses and precious few older brick buildings around the former market which is, here as elsewhere, now a park.

The Taitz sisters have been living for many decades on one of the sidestreets still lined with wooden houses. The elder sister, Gitka died in her nineties recently, but her younger sister Dveirka is going strong, and continues to live in a wooden cabin with her cats and her jars and her potions. She and her sister worked for decades as seamstresses and the old Singer sewing machine stands proudly in the house. Dveirka does not make a move without consulting Blumka first.

The same is true of Meishke Preil, who was a child in the war, and was deported from his native Kovna to Auschwitz. When offered passage to America he refused because he was sure he would find family in Lithuania. He ended up in Svintsyan, where he lives to this day, as the youngster of the community.

But there is one Svintsyaner who keeps away from the others, and has all the rough charm of his forebears who are

known to all the town's oldtimers. He is Shimke Gurvitz, son of Meishke the wagoner. In fact, his entire family were wagoners for generations in Svintsyan. The Yiddish word for a wagoner is *balagole* (balle-GO-leh). Although the term stems from the majestic old Hebrew for "master of the wagon" (baal-agolo), it acquired a touch of roughness over the generations, and that is no surprise. Like the truck drivers of any society, who must safely convey passengers or goods by day and night, through good areas and bad, they *had* to be tough.

Before the war, a big part of Shimke's income came from hauling wagonfuls of merchandise between Svintsyan and Vilna. He would take chickens, pig's hair (for brushmaking), raw hides, dried mushrooms, apples and boot-socks to Vilna for sale, and return with a wagonful of glassware, leather, hardware, glue, paint, paper and other manufactured goods.

When the thousands of Svintsyan Jews were about to be taken from the ghetto, in October 1941, and marched to the huge deathpit in Svintsyanke to the west, Shimke's mother hanged herself in an act of defiance in their own home. She told her neighbors: "They are not going to shoot me." He himself is a decorated war hero who was in the Soviet army at the time.

Shimke is a master of Yiddish curses of the oldtime wagoners, such as we have found nowhere else. He never dreamt (nor can the other Jews around understand) that in his late eighties, mighty as ever, the sharp-tongued wagoner has lived to be paid for his curses by a traveling Yiddish linguist from abroad, son of a native of Svintsyan. If you live long enough, as the saying goes. . .

IVYE

Ivye, a village southeast of Vilna, was for centuries a testament to multiculturalism. Its Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Muslim (Tatar) and Jewish populations lived in peace for generations. Between the wars, the Jewish community of over two thousand constituted about three quarters of the population. The distillation of brandy was for centuries the village's cross-cultural economic pride.

In Jewish culture, Ivye (EEV-yeh, or in some renditions, EEV-eh), was known for its frequent mentions in the seventeenth and eighteenth century record books of the Jewish "Council of the Land of Lithuania," the autonomous Jewish rabbinic council of Lithuanian Jewry (which grew out of the much larger system of councils that grew into the Council of the Four Lands from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries.

In more recent generations, its reputation derives from it being the birthplace of a number of rabbinic greats, starting with Reb Meishe Ivyer, an intimate of the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797), and going right up to the Second World War. The last rabbi of Vilna, Chaim-Oyzer Grodzinsky, who was lucky enough to die of a broken heart in 1940, when the Soviets closed his yeshiva, and before the Germans arrived to exterminate the entire Jewish population, was a native of Ivye.

Much of the center of Ivye burned down in a massive fire in the late 1920s. Rumor had it that the fire was started by someone after the insurance money who intended to burn only his own house, but things got out of hand, as they can in such situations. Much of the main street ("the business district") was insured by Vilna (then Wilno) insurance companies, who then rebuilt it all in brick. So, instead of wooden cottages, the center of Ivye sports beautiful brick houses, in the charming local style of the 1920s, and have remained intact to this day, down to the outside pumps that replaced the old wells. The traveler who would drive through

today, and not stop, might miss the poverty of the town, and dream of a rebuilt Ivye of the end of the 1920s in then northeastern Poland.

❋

Our usual party, again joined by Belorussian scholar Vital Zajka, landed in Ivye one autumn day. We were told that there was a handful of Jews in town, so we proceeded to seek them all out.

The youngest family is that of the village pediatrician, Dr. Maria (originally Minya) Shapiro, still practicing into her seventies, and her husband Mottel Gumnitz (born in 1921), who worked for decades in a Soviet enterprise that bought up agricultural products from the peasants in the surrounding hamlets. They tell us of the calamity that befell Ivye's Jewry when around two thousand five hundred Jews were massacred on the 12th of May 1942. These were the Jews from Ivye and its surroundings who had been incarcerated in the local ghetto from September 1941. A thousand more, deemed useful, were kept alive until January 1943, when they were transferred to Borisov and murdered, and Ivye was declared *Judenrein* (clean of Jews). Maria and Mottel tell us: "But it will not be Judenrein as long as we are alive!"

Maria and Mottel apologize for their weak memory of Yiddish, and send us to the other remaining handful.

We find Yeisef Kalmanovitsh (born 1916) in a run-down wooden cottage. The man is a living encyclopedia of the Ivye of old. He remembers the three major synagogues that thrived before the war: *der alter bismedresh* (the old studyhouse), *der nayer bismedresh* (the new studyhouse) and the smaller *klayzl* (Yiddish diminutive of *kloyz,* a small synagogue cum study house; the word is distantly related to English *cloister,* and, to Lithuanian Yiddish *kleyster* "Catholic church"). Besides these three, there was the huge *zumerdike shul.* The term translates as "summer synagogue" but in the life of an East European shtetl it has a special meaning. The large, magnificent brick or stone synagogue with its high ceilings and dome was far too expensive to heat in the cold months, and

was generally used only from around Passover time to the end of the high holidays in the autumn. This "big synagogue" in many shtetls had an *ezres-noshim* or ladies' balcony, and is often known in Yiddish literature as *di kalte shul* (the cold synagogue). It is culturally important to note that Yiddish has much warmer, more intimate words for the smaller, often wooden structures, that were open all year and that doubled as studyhouses or mini-yeshivas which were open all year, and for study, often until the early hours or even, as one might find advertised today, "twenty-four hours a day."

Old Kalmanovitsh tells us the "real" names of the streets (now bearing the usual Soviet set of names, from Lenina to Kirava to Gagarina). He shows us *Ferd-gas* ("Horse Street"), *Navaredker gas* (the street heading in the direction of Novogrudok, known in Yiddish as Naváredok), and the main street *Vilner gas* (Vilna Street, which was the main street of most towns in Vilna province). His father had been a coppersmith.

Last but not least, we are referred by Gentiles in town (the Jews won't mention this guy's name) to a most unusual native of Ivye, a gentleman who emigrated to Israel, lived there for thirty years, and returned to live (and die) in Ivye. For this he was shunned by the handful of Jews in the area, who accused him of spreading calumny about the Jewish State. They warned us not to go see him. Naturally, we spared no effort to seek him out. . .

Mottel Tzemachovitch, born in 1921, was the only shtetl Jew we ever found who did not let us into his house (this had happened with some converts who thought that "nobody knew"). He explained that his huge rottweiler is untamable. After hearing the thing bark from the street, we decided that we didn't want to see his place after all.

Next, this eccentric gentleman explained that he refuses to give an interview to a Jewish interviewer. I proudly told him that one of our party is a Yiddish speaking Belorussian, Vital Zajka. Vital conducted the interview over the hood of Pioter's car. I had to restrain Ziske, a staunch Zionist, from starting a fight with the man. Pioter, as ever, calmed everybody down, and Vital's interview of Mottel Tzemachovitch proceeded apace.

On the linguistic side of things, Tzemachovitch remembered the dialect of Ivye down to the finest detail. When asked why he returned to Ivye after three decades in Israel, he keeps offering one reply, uttered in deep Yiddish, but with no elaboration. It is:

Tsu vos iz lib der golderner bekher, az er iz ful mit trern?

This can translate:

"Who needs the golden wine goblet, when it is filled with tears?"

He turns to the two silent listeners, Ziske and myself, warning that we will spend the rest of our lives wondering about his reply, about why a Jew would leave Petach Tikva for Ivye in his old age.

The only other morsel that can be pried out of the man has to do with his feelings about fellow Jews. His fellow *Ivyer* (Ivye Jews before the war) were, he says, *gute yidn, andere yidn, haynt iz sheyn nito* (good Jews, other Jews than today, they are gone now).

But not to end badly, Tzemachovitch offers us all apples from his garden as he bids us farewell.

When we returned to Ivye, he had died. One of the Christian neighbors told us: "Some Jews in advanced age undertake all the difficulties of a long journey and give up a life style to die in the Holy Land. For this man, though he wouldn't admit it to another Jew, Ivye was the Holy Land, and he undertook all the difficulties of a long journey and gave up a lifestyle to die in Ivye."

And that he did.

STEIPTS

Steipts is the Lithuanian Yiddish rendition of standard Yiddish *Stoipts,* a little town whose formal name is *Stolbtsy.* Jews are known to have lived there from the sixteenth century at least. Between 1919 and 1921 it was the scene of very bitter battles between the new republic of Poland and the new Soviet Union. It ended up just on the Polish side.

Steipts is to the east of Mir, and in Jewish culture there is a certain invisible intra-Lithuanian Jewish border between the two. While Mir (with its yeshiva) was a stronghold of the Vilna style *misnagdim* (anti-Chasidim), Steipts was in those parts one of the first towns where many or most of the Jews turned to Chabad (the Lithuanian chasidic dynasty loyal to the Lubavitcher rebbe of the day).

In twentieth century Jewish history, the best-known personality to have emerged from the two towns is the third president of the State of Israel, Zalman Shazar (1889—1974) who was also a fine scholar and a poet. His adopted Israeli name Shazar is in fact a latter-day acronym taken from his real name, Shneur-Zalman Rubashov. He was born in Mir, but after a big fire in town, his family moved to Steipts where he grew up, and came under the influence of Chabad, of Zionism and of the Jewish labor movement. The result was the synthesis of religious, socialist and Zionist ideals in this remarkably Jewish personality, who will always be the first to come to mind when Steipts is mentioned.

By the time we got to Steipts, there was one elderly Jewish native left, Rosa Perlman. After ascertaining her original name, Reiza (RAY-zeh) Sorkin, and going through the dialectological questionnaire, we find that she has little to report in the way of memories of pre-war Jewish life.

But Reiza does have a story she wants to share. To appreciate its full qualities, one has to hear it in the original rich shtetl Yiddish. But for here, a literal translation will have to suffice.

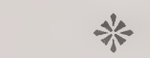
"When the Soviet Union collapsed, something incredible happened to us. Do you want to know what? I will tell you what.

"I and my two daughters were sitting and looking out the window, and suddenly, we saw a huge cross in the sky. We ran out into the street to catch a better look, and saw the cross changing shape. It took on the form of a human head with helpless arms stretched outward.

"Later on, when we told the Christian neighbors and the priest, their main question was which of us saw the wondrous scene first. It was my daughter Chana. The various priests have been coming around since to bless us and to announce that Chana would have great joy in life that would bring happiness to all of us, because we had the good fortune to be shown this thing from God himself.

"But it hasn't happened yet, the pension still does not cover the bare necessities.

"By the way, I love Yiddish songs, but have forgotten so many of the words. Maybe you can send me a Yiddish song book?"



After our visit with Reiza and her daughters, we head for what little is left of the old Jewish cemetery. It is hard to find any intact headstones there. Among the few are those of Mordechai son of Eliezer-Michel Barishansky and Elkono son of Avrom Tunik. For quite a long time, we look at their stones, almost as if we had felt a need to interview someone else in Zalman Shazar's town before heading onward.

VALOZHIN

In a perceptual "equivalence of evocations," the word *Valozhin* (va-LUH-zhin) evokes for East European Jews what Oxford and Harvard do for varying tribes of the English speaking world. A feeling of exquisite, exclusive top-level scholarship set in a shiny city of learning high upon some hill.

Valozhin (often spelled Volozhin) is a small town at the southern tip of what was the czarist Province of Vilna. But in Jewish culture, the word will forever be associated with the yeshiva that was founded there in 1802, by Chaim Valozhiner (Chaim of Valozhin), one of the most beloved pupils of the greatest rabbinic scholar ever, the Gaon of Vilna, and a major scholar himself.

It was to become "the mother of the modern Lithuanian yeshivas" and the first great modern rabbinic academy in general.

From the academic point of view, it took its cues from the Gaon of Vilna, accepting only intellectual scholarship (albeit in the framework of traditional Jewish religious belief) rather than casuistry and clever manipulation. What this meant in practical terms was adoption of the Gaon's method of reconstructing the original text where a text is incomprehensible, rather than dreaming up fanciful, clever homilies to "explain away" the difficulties arising.

From the organizational point of view, Chaim introduced a strict curriculum of study in which students were paired in small groups to study together after hearing the day's lecture. The study shifts were so organized that for all intents and purposes, the literature of Torah and its commentaries was studied close to twenty-four hours a day at the yeshiva. The strict admissions policy meant that only the best students in both talent and energy for constant study could gain admission and remain.

Socially, the status of the *yeshive-bokher* (yeshiva student) was suddenly changed from that of a poor *schlemiel* who has to eat at

someone else's house every day to stay alive (the now-romanticized institution of *esn teg,* eating each day at someone else's house), to a proud student with a scholarship. After giving his own inheritance to set up the yeshiva along these modern lines, a campaign of fundraising was launched which enabled the yeshiva to take in the very best and maintain the status of the yeshiva student at a high level.

The intellectual fabric of it all came in the greatest measure from Reb Chaim Valozhiner (1749—1821) himself. Like many great rabbinic scholars, he was far too modest to publish his writings during his lifetime. His most famous work, called *Nefesh ha-Chaim* ("The Soul of Life" and simultaneously a play on his name, which means "life"), was published (and probably named), in 1824, by his son and successor at the yeshiva, Isaac, known as Reb Itsalle of Valozhin. It is a philosophical and Kabbalistic tract which firmly establishes traditional learning and immersion in the sacred texts in order to gain true understanding of these texts as the highest level a human can achieve, when this learning is undertaken for its own sake. In this sense it is a response to the hasidic view that ecstatic prayer and cleaving to God and to His appointed dynastic Rebbe is the highest goal.

Beyond the debate about the primacy of scholarship (the misnagdic, Vilna view) versus that of rapturous prayer (the hasidic view), this book by the founder of the Valozhin yeshiva is also a philosophical response against the "Spinozist" elements of hasidic philosophy. According to the hasidic masters, God's immanence is everywhere, in the leaves of the tree and the boards of a house. Chaim insisted on the traditional distinction between Creator and Created.

In many ways, Chaim of Valozhin's tract is a nuanced response to the classic text of the Lubavitch (Chabad) hasidic movement, the *Tanya,* which today's Lubavitch movement publishes in many dozens of languages. Chaim of Valozhin's work — the Lithuanian misnagdic response to philosophical hasidism — remains an esoteric treatise for a select few.

The yeshiva of Valozhin inspired the rise of numerous analogous institutions throughout the area of Jewish Lithuania and

beyond and serves as the model for the best rabbinical academies today (including Lakewood in New Jersey, Gateshead in Britain, and many in Israel). A number of rabbinic family dynasties, the best known of which are the Soloveitchiks, came to prominence at Valozhin in the nineteenth century.

By the late nineteenth century, the yeshiva was producing not only Talmudic scholars but also rebels, revolutionaries and Hebrew and Yiddish authors. An image developed by the late nineteenth century has the Valozhin yeshiva student hiding a revolutionary tract, or a modern Hebrew or Yiddish book, underneath the huge Talmudic tome being studied.

The national poet of the modern Hebrew revival, Chaim-Nachman Bialik (1873—1934), was one of the yeshiva's alumni, who immortalized it in his classic poem *Ha-Masmid* ("The Constant Studier"). The yeshiva was closed by czarist authorities in 1892, when its head refused the demand to introduce secular studies, with the accusation of revolutionary activity not far under the surface. It was reopened some years later, and survived until the Holocaust. In the interwar years, it was in the Polish Republic.

Driving southward toward Valozhin, we pass beautiful pastures with idyllic wooden houses and homesteads sprinkled along the way. Most of the area seems so underpopulated, with so much room for everybody that it seems crazy that so much blood was spilled in this part of the world.

Riding into town, one is struck today by the dumpiness of modern Valozhin. It is one of the worst kept towns we have seen, with crumbling Soviet buildings among crumbling older structures. It does not take long to find the building that once housed the yeshiva. It is recognizable from the famous pictures. The middle of three stories is used for a filthy government food shop (since closed down), and the lower and upper levels are eerily desolate. When the wind blows through some of the windowless gaps below

and above, it seems that the famous chant of studying Talmud continues to echo through these sacred walls.

When we emerge onto the yard surrounding the ruin, a drunk starts bellowing that "this building is where the god-damned Jews started communism." We were accompanied on this expedition by Vital Zajka who told him off in exquisite Belorussian. It is one of the very few times we have encountered discourtesy from the local population in Belarus. More than anything, we were startled that something remained of the history of the place, its having become a "training school" for Jewish revolutionaries at one point in its history, though its Talmudic studies remain its eternal claim to fame.

There are a number of Jewish families in town. Only one of them, the Skluts, are an old Valozhin family, and various gravestones on what is left of the old Jewish cemetery bear the name Sklut.

In a run-down wooden house further along the main street (known as Sovetskaya, nowadays) we find the most interesting Jewish character in town, at least for us.

He is Zeidel Katz, a religious Jew who is a former yeshiva student himself, though not at Valozhin. He is a native of Kreve, and in his youth he studied at the "preparatory yeshiva" in Oshmene (now Ashmyana) to the north. This man has been studying the few volumes of the Talmud in his possession for the entire half-century of Soviet rule.

Zeidel is a rather rare name in these parts. He explains that his name was changed when he was a little boy because his brothers and sisters died of various ailments, and his parents didn't want to "save" him by the overused formula of changing his name to "Alter" ("Old One," so the sick person would make it to old age, a frequent source of the Yiddish name Alter). Instead his parents took the Yiddish word for grandfather, *zeide*, gave it a diminutive ending so it would suit a child, and he became *Zeidel* (Zeydl), blessed to live to become a grandfather. Like Avrom-Yankev of Radashkovitz, he is convinced that this blessing worked, enabling him to be the only person in his family to survive

the Holocaust (he escaped to Russia and returned after the war to the region, settling with his wife in Valozhin).

Zeidel recalls his grandfather Simon, lovingly known as Reb Shimalle, who had been a rabbi in Kreve. Much as he weeps at the fate of the building that housed the Valozhin yeshiva, he takes solace that foreign Jews have restored the gravesite of Chaim of Valozhin and built a wall around the remains of the Jewish cemetery, even though locals continue to pasture their goats there.

Zeidel lives in a crumbling wooden house. The wind and cold come right through the unfilled gaps between the logs. His clothes are shabby and torn. He says "the American Jews have forgotten those of us who stayed behind here, but I have nothing against them for this. Clearly, it is the will of God. Come, let us learn from a book I have here." He pulls out a tome of the Talmud that he bought from a peasant after the war and begins to read it, with the traditional chant of study, as if he alone were destined to continue the grand tradition of Valozhin into the twenty-first century. He remarks that the difference from zero to one is infinitely greater than say three to four or seven to eight.

But more than anything or anyone else, his thoughts focus every day on one the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust: his teacher at Oshmene, who was known as *Farfl der magid* (Farfel the preacher). "It was those three years, just before the Soviets invaded in 1939, that give me the ability to study Talmud all my life, which is what keeps me going. But I was born in 1917. How long can I live? Maybe the Almighty will send someone else to come and study Talmud every day here in Valozhin, it's a sacred thing, it must be done. . ."

OSHMENE

People often ask:

"But don't all those last of the Mohican shtetl Jews you keep talking about have kids? How Jewish are they? don't they want to know more about their Jewish heritage now that the Soviet Union is gone? Will there be no continuity for those who stay there?"

It is never fair to generalize or stereotype, but it is also wrong to skirt the question. The generalization that I would make after a decade of expeditions to seek out shtetl Jews would be along the lines of the following.

Our last shtetl Jews have had lives that we westerners plain and simple cannot fathom. They grew up in the turmoil surrounding the First World War (which in these parts caused havoc until well into the 1920s). Then they experienced the interwar poverty and racist nationalisms of the various new republics that replaced the old Russian Empire. And then, in 1939, those west of the old Soviet-Polish frontier had to see all their beloved cultural life (whether the synagogue, the yeshiva, the Zionist club or the Bundist movement) closed down. And then came the Nazis and the mass murder of almost everyone they were related to, grew up with, were intimate with. Unlike others, they decided to return or stay in the town of their forebears. But that wasn't all. The victory celebrations over "choking the Germans in their own Berlin" were hardly over when in the late 1940s, came Stalin's destruction of Soviet Yiddish culture, the murder of the leading Yiddish writers and cultural leaders (culminating with the shooting of the greatest Soviet Yiddish writers in 1952). Those were years when people were sent to hard labor in Siberia for singing a Hebrew or Yiddish song.

We would be less than human if we did not understand that these people wanted nothing for their children but to live a peaceful, quiet normal life. That meant a concentrated effort to

turn their children into "homo Sovieticai" who would fit in with their surroundings and hopefully never suffer what they suffered. In judging the rampant assimilationism of our "Mohicans" we must never, not for a moment, lose sight of the famed words of that inimitable third century sage Hillel: "Don't judge the next fellow until you are in placed in his circumstances" (Pirkey Oves / Pirke Aboth 2: 5).

With the opening of the floodgates in the Gorbachov years and beyond, many of the children of our discovered shtetl Jews — children born from the 1940s onward, grandchildren from the 1960s onward — suddenly saw Jewishness not as a badge of "otherness" (at best) or "embarrassment" (at worst), but as a ticket to Israel and potentially other "rich" countries.

It must be remembered that many left before we started our expeditions in the early 1990s. Those whom we have found have been inclined to stay, usually because of conscious and open desire to live out one's days in the shtetl of their forebears rather than seek a better life elsewhere. In many cases, middle aged children who were a little embarrassed about their parents' deep ethnic Jewishness in the early 1990s underwent a transformation throughout the decade, concurrent with daily life getting more difficult even on the "western" side of the new east-west border, in other words, in Lithuania and Latvia as well as Belarus.

The most extreme case encountered was a young man who was ashamed in the early 1990s of his grandmother's Jewishness, and even asked us not to let on to his friends that this lady is his grandmother. By the late 1990s, he was bombarding us with express letters and faxes asking for letters confirming his Jewishness, which he needed to emigrate to Germany.

We have, however, noticed one strong difference in the area of language preservation. In Lithuania, a Jew in his or her thirties or forties now is likely to understand and speak Yiddish (even if russified Yiddish), which is less frequently the case in Belarus. All this deserves study by sociologists and sociolinguists as does another remarkable fact: this knowledge of Yiddish vastly outstrips that in western countries (not counting the large hasidic and tiny Yiddishist communities), where there was no fear of anything

except appearing too ethnically, culturally or linguistically — Jewish.

But in the context of our story, it means that we have very rarely encountered a multi-generation "proud Jewish family." In fact, if to speak about a shtetl rather than the big cities which will form the focus of volume II of *Back to the Old Country,* we have found exactly one such family, in a little town called Oshmene (now Ashmiana in Belarus).

Oshmene (OSH-meh-neh), on the Vilna to Minsk road, is one of the oldest Jewish settlements in Lithuania, going back to the days of the mighty Grand Dukes of Lithuania.

We did not find any Jewish natives of Oshmene, but we found one family of three generations, all of whom are proud Jews.

The matriarch of the family is Bella Lipkovitch, whose Yiddish name is Beilka (BAYLE-keh) Dillon. The East European Jewish family name *Dillon*, when it is original, usually derives from the Sephardic, Hispanic *D'Leon*, a family of refugees from the Spanish Inquisition of 1492 who fled to Poland and Lithuania. Beilka remembers her grandparents telling her they were in fact descended from the Sephardim of old. She was born in Kreve and descended from a long line of rabbis, the last of whom was her father, Elle-Heersh (Elijah Tsvi) Dillon. Her mother, Dveirel Abilovitch, was a native of Oshmene, and through a long circuitous story, that is how they all came to settle here after the war. Her mother was a folk-healer "who could heal illnesses better than any doctor."

During the war, she was imprisoned in various ghettos, including Oshmene and Kovna, and various slave labor camps, among them Zhezhmer (now Žiežmariai, not far from Kovna / Kaunas). She escaped into the forest with two children. One was hers, the other was her orphaned nephew (her husband's sister's son). The escape occurred as the Germans were leading a group of six hundred Jews through the forest. Her husband escaped too, on the other side of the column, and they found each other late at night. They survived for fourteen days without food until good

peasants took the risk of harboring and feeding the Jewish escapees from the German death machine.

Beilka reports that before entering the ghetto in her native Kreve (KRE-veh), she left a cow and other belongings with a Catholic priest. When she found him after the war, he was among the Poles being repatriated to within the new borders of Poland; this section of pre-war northeastern Poland was incorporated into Belarus in 1939, and that incorporation reconfirmed after the liberation from the Nazis in 1944. Beilka reports that the priest made sexual demands, and that when she refused him, he denied having received the cow and other belongings from the family.

A simple Christian, however, had hidden her father's Torah Scroll, and considered it an act of simply honesty to return it to the family after the war without asking a penny. The Oshmene family know of its value in the west and they have a suitable hiding place for the treasure.

In addition, Beilka has a single volume of the Talmud, the tractate *Gittin* (on divorce law), printed in Vilna in 1923 by the famed Romm publishing house. A sticker inside indicates that it was won in the Chanukah 1927 raffle sponsored by the popular Vilna Yiddish newspaper *Dos Vort*. Only in Vilna perhaps, would popular Yiddish newspapers raffle out volumes of the Talmud as prizes! The book is printed on the cheap interwar paper which is quite fragile now.

"Please take it Dovid, I don't know whose it was before the war. Another good Christian peasant brought it to us in 1944 or 1945." She flips the pages one last time, pronouncing the headings she can read, *masekhte* (tractate), *peyrek* (chapter), *mishne* (the Hebrew Mishna component of the Talmud, completed around 200 AD), *gemóre* (the Aramaic Gemora component of the Babylonian Talmud completed around 500 AD), and so forth. She brings the book to her lips one last time and hands it over. "That way, you will remember Beilitshka Dillon of Kreve and Oshmene, when I am long gone!"

And, like a mother-in-law right out of Sholem Aleichem's shtetl Kasrilevke, she launches into a soliloquy against her son in law: "So he made two children, so what? What's the big deal? My

daughter is gold and silver!" (details omitted to protect the living…).

We then meet her daughter, Raya, and Raya's husband, Tevke the Milkman. Tevke is the Lithuanian Yiddish diminutive of Tevye. And he's not quite a milkman in the sense of someone who delivers milk, but he's worked all his life in a milk factory, and so the name *Tevke der milkhiker* (Tevye the Milkman) has stuck. Tevke, in his fifties, hails from a family from Disna to the far north, and speaks a deep Lithuanian Yiddish.

Then there are Beilka's two granddaughters, Marina and Dina who have come to love Yiddish and Jewish culture, mostly from their grandmother Beilka whom they cherish.

Quite recently, one of the two daughters was accepted on a program that takes teenagers to Israel for a year from former Soviet countries. Most frequently the program results in the teenagers staying and the rest of the family eventually coming too, because the tight-knit "can't live without each other" ethos of traditional East European families is very much alive here. But in this case something happened. Tevke turned up at the airport at Minsk and snatched his daughter back from the waiting line. "Nobody is taking my daughter away!"

When we asked the daughter about it on our next visit, she reported that she had very mixed feelings herself, and is happy to be near her parents and grandmother.

On our most recent visit, we accompanied an American couple, Edward and Phyllis Chait of the New York area to Oshmene. Phyllis's family had hailed from Oshmene.

We took the American couple to this one Jewish family. Edward wanted to leave a hefty swath of dollars, but Tevke is far too proud to accept cash. The negotiations turned to a gift that would be of use. The first idea that came to the family's mind was a washing machine. We rush to the one place in the center of town where this can be purchased. During the negotiations, it slips out that the machine will work only in a home with inside plumbing. "That's the end of that," says Tevke, emotionally relieved, it

seemed, that he will come out of this anything less than a master householder-breadwinner.

Back in the house, discussions turn to many other topics before the wise old mother-in-law, cognizant of the painful poverty, starts talking about the lucky people in town who own their own cow. This is also perhaps a little dig at Tevke, being that he works in a dairy factory himself. But after some initial reticence, Tevke comes around and talk turns to a cow that would provide milk, butter and cheese for the family. Edward jumps up in excitement, insisting that he won't leave town until he's bought the family a cow.

After many phone calls to local peasants, it turns out that there is a first-class cow for sale for $300. Edward wants the pleasure of seeing the cow and making the purchase personally. As the peasant was nearing the house with the cow, Tevke's face darkened appreciably. "My mother in law is too old to take care of the cow now, for all her brave talk, and I don't have the money to keep it fed and cared for. It will cost a fortune! This is something I'll have time for when I retire in a few years" time. Can we agree that you will return to Oshmene and buy me the cow then?"

Slightly stunned, Edward, who was so determined to leave a gift then and there shook hands on it, as the best he could do that day.

"It's a done deal!"

KRASLAVKA

Kraslavka (kras-LAV-keh) is a town in Latvia best known in Jewish lore, perhaps, for its native son artists, including the painter Abel Pann and the sculptor Naum Aronson. Jewish history books also tend to associate the town with the rise of the Jewish Labor movement. Its bristle factories were infamous for their exploitation of the workers, and histories of the Bund, Poalei Zion (Labor Zionism), and the short lived Independent Jewish Workers" Party (1901-1903) all refer to the activities in Kraslavka (now Kraslava) as pivotal to the history of these movements.

Walking around the old Jewish cemetery, better preserved than many others, one finds (rare these days) not only rabbinic tombstones but even perfectly preserved rabbinic mausoleums attesting to major rabbinic figures whom Jewish history has, peradventure, forgotten. One such mausoleum, remarkably intact after all the violence wrought against anything Jewish in these parts in the twentieth century, is for *Reb Eyliohu Zalkind ben Yehude-Leyb ha-Leyvi* (Rabbi Elijah Zalkind son of Judah-Leib the Levite), who died, we are told in the flowery Hebrew text on Tuesday the 26th of Tamuz Tarsag = 5663 in the Jewish lunar calendar (which fell on Tuesday the 21st of July 1903). We also learn of the tragic death of his grandson in 1904, who also came to burial in the mausoleum. This type of small structure is known in Yiddish as an ó*yhel* (from the classical Hebrew word for "tent" or "tabernacle"). The many undisturbed gravestones have many stories to tell, and maybe one day, someone will come and "listen". . .

Looking for living Jews in this largely preserved quaint town, we are told there are two households with Jewish natives of the town.

The first is an elderly widow, Ida Lever, who lives in a Soviet apartment and had undergone chemotherapy after a serious operation. Born in 1920, she attended the local Yiddish school until her father Meishe Lever, a shopkeeper, was told by friends that his daughter's life would be better if she switched to the Latvian language school, and so she did.

Latvian nationalism notwithstanding, Ida recalls a sense of harmony and mutual respect between the town's two thousand or so Jews and the Latvian, Russian and Polish communities. The Latvian school for example made every allowance for Jewish children to be able to observe the holidays of their faith. On the Sabbath all the Jewish shops were closed.

In 1940 the Soviets made Latvia into a Soviet Republic and the synagogues and shops were closed with equal speed and vehemence. When the Germans were advancing in the last week of June 1941, Ida, who had heard in Riga that the Germans would be shooting all the Jews, persuaded four other relatives, including her parents, to go on foot to Dagda, and to keep going until they were deep in Russia. Her mother and father both died during their hard labor at Soviet collective enterprises in Uzbekistan, where the family was eventually evacuated. Now all these years later, after many years of a hard work in a factory and the awful operation and chemotherapy, Ida has one pride and joy left: she is the keyholder to the well-kept old Jewish cemetery.

We bid Ida farewell and make our way to the second Kraslavka Jewish native still around from prewar times. We are warned that he is a fearful and sad old man who does not like to talk to strangers. Locals give us the idea to seek out his fifty-something son, a taxi-driver, at the local station's taxi stand where he is to be found idle in his jalopy most of the day, and to ask him to take us to his dad. It turns out to be sterling advice.

Leizer Reichlin was born in 1921 in the town, and is unable to overcome his sadness over the murder of the town's Jewish residents. They were deported to Dvinsk (Daugavpils) and shot.

His prominent eyebrows seem to turn upward of their own accord when he speaks of his pre-war youth. He attended the traditional Jewish religious cheider and helped carry goods to and

from the market to earn a bit of cash, and helped merchants pack goods to be sent away by train. He became known as the best packer in town.

There were, he recalls two wooden and two brick prayerhouses, and one building still stands.

He talks about all the parties in town before the war, from the ultra- religious to the ultra-leftists. His son hands him a note, to remind him, as it were, of something he has forgotten. Leizer cannot make it out and the son finally whispers (in a Jewish whisper that is audible to everyone in the room) *di Bolshevikes,* urging his father not to forget about the communists. The sharp twist to this is that father and son muse on how wrong these pre-war idealists were, for when the communists did come and take over in 1940, their family lost both their religious freedom and their livelihood. Leizer also reminisces about the two rabbis in town, Reb Koppel and Reb Moyshe, recalling how brokenhearted Reb Koppel was when his children turned communist and crossed the border into Russia, never to be heard from again.

The family, like Ida's, were among the tiny minority that believed the reports about mass murder and fled to Russia. He recalls fleeing on June 26th 1941, and making for Kalinsk-Uralsk and then the Red Army. Upon returning in 1945, he was able to move into his aunt's house, where he still lives.

As we are about to part, Leizer tells us of two "present-day tragedies, one personal and one for all the Jewish people."

The personal tragedy is that the poverty has become so great with the ongoing collapse of what was left of the Soviet era social safety web (and his American and South African relations have no interest in helping him). He must now experience "the ultimate humiliation" of emigrating "against his will" to Germany, the only country, he says, that will take him and give him a decent place to live, a good pension and proper medical care.

The national Jewish tragedy he tells us, is called "Monika Levinskaya." His views must of course be seen against the backdrop of his culture, biography and sense of Jewish history.

"You see, a Jewish girl, pretty as Queen Esther in the Bible, her name is Monika Levinskaya, had some romance with the president of the United States. She admitted to it, and even brought some dress of hers to prove it, and thereby betrayed the greatest man on earth who has millions of supporters. For generations, the Jews will be blamed and there will be one calamity after another. Mark my word! There is just no end to all the *tsores* (trouble). . ."

KLETSK

The name Kletsk has an enchantment that rings alongside Valozhin, Mir, Ponevezh, Slabodka and the other great Lithuanian centers of rabbinic learning. But it wasn't always that way. In fact the famous Kletsk yeshiva is really the yeshiva of another town, Slutsk, that moved to Kletsk.

The Kletsk yeshiva goes with a unique story of an inspired leader who rescued his institution during *both* World Wars. In 1921, when the Polish-Russian war began to give way to negotiated armistice lines (entailing substantial Polish withdrawals), it became clear that Slutsk would remain on the Soviet side. Unlike some heads of yeshivas who imagined that their institutions would somehow survive in the Soviet environment, the head of Slutsk yeshiva, Rabbi Aaron Kotler (1892—1962) proclaimed that the world of Torah scholarship would not survive the new society that the Bolsheviks were introducing and forcing upon the population. So, he picked himself up from Slutsk with his whole yeshiva (and a good many townspeople too), leaving behind their real estate and much else, and crossed the border over onto the Polish side, more or less stopping at the first shtetl there — Kletsk. And so, the great world center of Torah scholarship led by Rabbi Kotler was, quite literally, "the Slutsk Yeshiva in Kletsk." When the Soviets overran Kletsk in September 1939, and the Soviets proceeded to "give" Vilna to the Lithuanian Republic, Rabbi Kotler moved with as many yeshiva students as possible to Vilna (the Polish Wilno that had just become the Lithuanian Vilnius, so to speak), which was briefly in independent and free Lithuania. Like its sister yeshiva in Mir, Kotler and many of his pupils were rescued via Japan, or Japanese transit visas issued by Japanese consul Chiune "Sempo" Sugihara (1900—1986). From Japan Kotler made it to the United States, and established the great yeshiva of Lakewood, New Jersey, which is in effect, the old Kletsker yeshiva, or put more retrospectively, the old Slutsker yeshiva that had moved to Kletsk and then via Japan to Lakewood. In America he established

the *Vaad Hatsolo* (Rescue Committee), which concentrated on getting great Torah scholars out of a Europe in flames. Most recently, the provocative book of Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, has raised questions about the policy of concentrating rescue efforts on great Torah scholars, and raised painful questions on what so many other groups might have done (E. Zuroff, *Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939—1945*).

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Of course, Kletsk as a shtetl has a long history predating the "survival of both world wars" story of Aaron Kotler and his yeshiva. Its community is well documented back in the sixteenth century and its magnificent great synagogue was completed in 1796.

The more than four thousand Jews of Kletsk met a horrific end in the Holocaust. Many were shot and buried, often alive, in a mass grave near the Catholic cemetery. Of those kept alive in the ghetto which the Germans established in town, over a thousand were burned alive when it was set on fire by the Germans on July 21st 1942.

When we made it to Kletsk in the late 1990s, there was only one native Jew left: Joseph Pshepyurka, who was born in the town and worked in the family pharmacy as a boy before the war. His mother hails from an old Kletsk family; his father had come from Warsaw. They were among the tiny number of culturally Polonized Jews. And, now, says, Pshepyurka, history has played an ironic trick.

"Jews from everywhere look me up as a kind of phenomenon, the last Kletsker in Kletsk. So I have had to become an expert on where everything was, what is left and so forth. It is all very sad, and soon I will be gone too. It is strange to think that our family only wanted to be good Poles in every way, you hear how awful my Yiddish is, and now I am the one and only

representative of Kletsk Jewry still here. But when history puts a responsibility on a person, the person must accept it with grace."

But there is a second Jew in Kletsk. Not a Kletsker himself, and much younger than Pshepyurka, Dr. Leonid Markovich Levin, was born in 1937 into an assimilated Russian Jewish family much further east. He moved to Kletsk to practice medicine here some thirty-five years ago.

In sharp contrast to other towns, where the word "Jewish" is spoken softly, any questions about Jews on the streets and town square of Kletsk lead to near rapturous excitement. Just about everyone in Kletsk regards Dr. Levin as a sexy, charismatic medical genius, who will any day put Kletsk on the map of the world.

"You are looking for Jews? Dr. Levin is the head of our hospital in Kletsk!"

We find Dr. Levin in his hospital and learn of his two claims to fame. First he has introduced a specially developed branch of "iris diagnosis," where meticulous eye examination reveals everything going on in just about every cell of the body. Nobody had heard of such method in Soviet times here. People come hundreds of miles to be diagnosed by Dr. Levin. The population of Kletsk does not have to wait. Outsiders are put on a waiting list and often go away disappointed, being examined not by Levin but by one of the coterie of young doctors who have come from all over Belarus to work with him. The special little "eye examination booth" paneled in local Belorussian pine within and without, is a sort of holy-of-holies for the impoverished population of this backwater town. The anteroom is also fashioned all of local wood, with various traditional wood carvings in the folk tradition. One is of a man studying a book, and another of a hand holding a cup of healing fluids.

There is a huge "electric chart" in which you press the button with name of your ailment (discovered beforehand via eye examination), and the names of the various cures pop up with electric lights. The simple matrix wiring seems a miracle to the people here. At the heart of these huge electric charts are twenty-seven maladies, to which, according to Dr. Levin, all the world's illnesses can be reduced, and twenty-seven principal cures. And

this takes us to Dr. Levin's second, and more ambitious claim to fame.

He claims only marginal originality in eye diagnosis. What he and just about everyone in Kletsk believe will soon be revealed to the world, as soon as there is funding for industrial scale production and mechanisms to market abroad, is something else.

We ask what. Dr. Levin answers with a smile: "Come with me!" We follow the doctor, who looks much younger than his years, and sports a white shirt and tie, and, instead of a suit jacket or medical frock, an expensive leather jacket regarded as a kind of status symbol in these parts.

Dr. Levin takes us to a series of fields stretching into the horizon behind the town hospital. In these fields, his staff grows special herbal medicines that can, he assures us, cure just about any ailment. If a herbal remedy or pharmaceutical company were only to ignore the politics of the business-wary government in Minsk, they would make a fortune. We are asked to spread the word in the west.

On our farewell walk through Kletsk, with Dr. Levin, we are treated to feeling of walking with a star. Wherever we turn people walk up to Dr. Levin and shake his hand. With inspirational gusto, he clasps the hand of each well wisher and utters a few words of encouragement. And, wherever we turned in town, people boast of how well they know Dr. Levin.

But it is Mr. Pshepyurka who has the time to take us to the mass graves of the Jews and to the remnants of the old cemetery, now deep in a forest.

On our way out of town, the staff from the government bakery left their premises and delivered a stack of freshly baked loaves to our car for the road. We wanted to pay but the women were insulted. "Friends of Dr. Levin are friends of ours! Eat in good health and come again soon to see us in Kletsk, now, won't you?"

It is all a curiosity for what is left of a shtetl called Kletsk. The Yiddish writer Mendel Tabatznik (1894—1975), a native of Kletsk who moved to Mir to head a pioneering modern Yiddish

school in the 1920s, emigrated (like many Litvaks) to South Africa, where he championed Yiddish language and culture for his entire life. Among his children and grandchildren are millionaires and billionaires who made their fortune in — generic drugs. From Generic UK to Merck, the genes of Kletsk continue to made medicine and millions.

Who knows, Dr. Levin's day may yet come. And the link of Kletsk to pioneering medicine may one day also come. . .

LINTOOP

For generations, Lintoop (LINN-toop) was known in Yiddish folklore as "the drunken town." It is not hard to figure out the reason. The little town's existence has for centuries revolved around the huge spirit factory that was built, and for centuries (before nationalization in the Soviet period), run by the family of Polish noblemen called Bushevsky.

To this very day, the whole town (now known as Lintupy, in Belarus, smack on the Lithuanian border) is a little tipsy. Spirit (the real McCoy 96° stuff) is the "perrier" of this place, and in these parts, the first little bottle or so seems to count as food! In czarist, Polish, Soviet and current times, little Lintoop has continued to supply the spirit for vodka factories far and wide.

The waste product from the factory is a liquid with a most delightful scent, combining the fragrances of freshly baked bread, baked potatoes, sugary sweet air and some indescribable exotic intoxicant. This liquid flows from the great old factory in all directions in open square wooden gulleys to "fertilize" the fields. Little wonder that the cows, goats, pigs and chickens all seem a trifle tipsy.

To get a fight started between any two self-respecting males in town, just ask the name of the Polish family who founded and ran the spirit factory for generations. Invariably, one will say "B*u*shevsky" and the other "B*i*shevsky." The *ooo* and *eee* screams get louder and louder, and often turn to shoves and blows. So, if you come to this place in peace, refrain from asking the name of the old Polish family of nobleman.

On the other hand, the old Bushevsky (or Bishevsky) Palace, moat and all still stands in the center of town, though it is now a dilapidated dump, its proud moat reduced to a circular ditch of muddy water and rubbish.

To ask how to get to it, just swallow the first syllable and ask for the palace of B'shevsky, and all will be well. The remarkable thing about the palace is that is has no front or back. Its architect

designed it to have "two equal fronts" on both sides. Eerily enough, decades of Soviet (and post Soviet) era dilapidation have resulted in uncannily identical deterioration on the two sides. The result is that the architect's master plan has, as it were, outlived his building.

The happy nature of Lintoop spilled over into its interethnic relations, which were unusually good-spirited. Old Bishevsky (or Bushevsky) invariably hired a Jew to run the spirit factory and his other concerns. The town rabbi before the war, Yudkovsky, shared a house with the Polish mayor, Bialaveisky.

The picturesque little town, with its huge spirit factory, nobleman's palace and streetlets of multicolored wooden houses, is surrounded by magnificent and mysterious forests on all sides.

This is where, at the beginning of our decade of expeditions, we found fifty-something Zuske Ostanovsky, who introduced me to the 96° proof stuff back in December 1990, and told me about his wife's uncle Avremke Rein of Michaleshik, which enabled us to bring Avremke back to Michaleshik to be videotaped as he bade the village of his ancestors a final farewell, before departing for the Holy Land.

I didn't know then that Zuske and his wife Yeva would play a pivotal role in our expeditions over the years. Yeva hails from an old Lintoop family, the Tzinmans, and she was the chemical director of the factory, while Zuske was a champion consumer of its product, which does not make him drunk, but inspires him to satirical monologues.

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Avremke Tzinman was one of *four* Jews who escaped Lintoop as the Germans were taking over. The other ninety or so were herded into a ghetto and shot by a mass grave at the edge of town in 1942.

Tzinman, his wife Sorra-Peshka, Meishke Sondak and Zalmen Katzkovitch decided to run for it. The four could lay their

hands on only three bicycles. So, Sorra-Peshka took turns sitting on the handlebars of the three gentlemen's bicycles.

Zalmen Katzkovitch, today the sole survivor of the four original escapees, tells it this way:

"The Germans had been bombing from the 22nd of June 1941. It was Yeva's father, Avremke Tzinman who tried to persuade the whole town that they would kill us all just because we were Jews. Most thought he had gone crazy, and when you think about it, the only people he did persuade were his wife, Sorra-Peshka, Meishke Sondak and myself.

"Our decision was firmed up on the 24th of June, just before the Germans set up their authority here in Lintoop. Of course none of us had access to a car, stealing one didn't come into the realm of possibility for honest people. And, we didn't like the idea of living in the forest. So we took our three bicycles and headed eastward at daybreak.

"We cycled and cycled like madmen before stopping to rest for the first time. German bombs were falling everywhere. It took us days to make it to the then Russian border, right past Radashkovitz. The border police didn't let us through. We slept the night at the home of a very kind Russian woman who laughed at the idea that you needed to cross at the official border. She took us across "the green border" in the early morning. We kept cycling and cycling, to Minsk, and from Minsk to Leppel, and from Leppel to Vitebsk and from Vitebsk to Viazma. There we ditched the bicycles and joined hordes of evacuees and were sent by train to Kuibyshev province, now Samara. We arrived in Kuibyshev two weeks to the day after leaving Lintoop.

"Every one of the four had a different fate. Meishke Sondak died of malaria in Russia. I was drafted into the Red Army and became a specialist in military transport on the railways. The Tzinmans — Avremke and Sorra-Peshka, were put to work a collective farm, a *kolkhoz*, where their daughter, our beloved Yeva from the spirit factory, was born in 1943. With Yeva's birth, the three survivors became four once again. Four we left Lintoop at the war's outset, and four we returned to Lintoop at its end. Poor Meishke Sondak wasn't destined to make it.

"Yeva grew up here, eventually studied chemistry, returned home and when on to rise to chief chemist at the Spirit Factory. During her student years she made a point to seek out a Jewish husband, although she always stresses what an internationalist she is, you know. She found our Zuske Ostanovsky from an old Polotsk family up north, he came down here and settled with her, they prospered in life and have two beautiful daughters who moved to Israel on that program where they bring the teenagers first.

"Me, I'm a Soviet person, an atheist. But I continue to have dreams every night about one incident. You know, as a youngster in town before the war, I believed in God like everyone else in town. But after what happened to the Jews here, forget it, I was convinced there could be no God. But one incident haunts me every night now in my old age. When the four of us left Lintoop on our three bicycles, we peddled for three days and three nights without a morsel of food. Suddenly hunger overcame all four of us, and we thought about giving up our harebrained escape by bicycle plan, and joining the Jews in the nearest ghetto, so as not to be shot by German patrols who were taking over the whole of the country.

"Suddenly out of nowhere, a young ram appeared. His horns were strikingly beautiful. He sat himself down right in front of us and did not make any attempt to escape. We slaughtered it, had a feast, and enough meat to take with us and keep ourselves going for weeks, eating very little bits at a time, after that first big feast."

There is a long pause. Zalmen Katzkovitch plays animatedly with his huge pitch-black pet cat, which seems permanently perched on the man's lap. And he continues.

"You know, I remember from *cheider*, the simple Jewish primary school here, the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham was about to kill his only son whom he loved because God commanded him to do so, when suddenly an angel stopped him and a ram appeared out of nowhere and Abraham killed the ram instead. Come to think of it, it was our Abraham, Avrom Tzinman, Yeva's father, who slaughtered the ram. Maybe it was

the same angel, and there is a God, and the Soviets were wrong. Who am I to know? I am a simple man."

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Tzinman's daughter, Yeva, the chief chemist of the spirit factory (who never touches alcohol), and her husband Zuske Ostanovsky (who loves the spirit factory's produce and teaches foreigners all the laws of drinking) are a charming middle aged couple, whose huge house opposite the spirit factory became our base of operations during many an expedition over a decade. It was a happy household, full of traditional laughter and satire, and for Ziske, Pioter and Dovid, it was for a decade the place we "landed" at after crossing the border from Lithuania, where he would retire for rest or logistical regrouping, and where we would end each expedition before recrossing the border into Lithuania.

Zuske, a chain smoker, was our "fixer." Whether we needed to find a translator, a car, or an old Jew a thousand miles away, Zuske took care of it. But above all, he kept out spirits up with his monologues. Standing up and smoking, leaning on his refrigerator in his tracksuit trousers, cigarette in hand, he would hold forth.

"My wife Yeva is sooner or later going to drag us all to Israel because she cannot live without our two daughters. I would stay here where we have this big house. I'm sorry we let our daughters go in the first place, but now it's too late. I'm going to become a vegetable in a tiny apartment in Afula. What to do?

"By the way, you know what started this whole emigration? The Mossad, of course. They carefully bombed a number of synagogues, so no one would get hurt of course, just about the time the Soviet Union was collapsing, so we'd all think there's some new Holocaust coming and move to Israel. The funny part is that the Mossad thinks we're stupid and we don't know. But what the heck, the Israelis are giving us everything, so we'll go and see what it's like, and if we don't like it, well' I'll be back here. But there's no arguing about their generosity. They gave my older brother from Polotsk a complicated heart operation though he

spent his life working for the Soviet Union. It's good that there is a Jewish country. Imagine, a Jewish country!?

"I certainly don't have anything against the Arabs. They are Semites so they can't be anti-Semites. If they want, I can get them plenty of cheap land around here.

"If I stayed here, I would become rich. Just bring me middle aged men from the west who want beautiful young wives who never heard of feminism. I'll arrange the match, I'm talking about love, not one night stands now. If he should ever dump her I will come after him with my knife and my gun, understand?

"Just so I don't forget, next time you come don't you dare bring another bottle of French champagne. It's water, it is! Feh! Better take our 96° spirit and we'll sell it to the Yanks. I love watching you westerners go blind the first time you taste the stuff, just like you, ten years ago, when you came looking for a Michalishker for your father. Who found him for you, Zuske, right? It's ten years later and you're still coming here. But it won't be the same for you once we are gone. You'll have to stay in one of our delightful hotels with the cockroaches and the bedbugs.

"There's just one bone I have to pick with you, Dovid. Why do you refuse to interview me all these years? You can say that I'm eighty-five and remember everything from before the war? Who the hell will know the difference? And if you ask me where everything was here, I'll make it all up, what do you care?

"Well, if you insist on riding around Belarus looking for old Jews, let me teach you how to ask in Russian. Just approach someone and say the following: "Do you have in your town any goddamn Jews like my good self?"

"Oh, and one last thing. don't look me up in Israel, ok? I want you to remember Zuske Ostanovsky of Polotsk, the master of this huge house in Lintoop, whose wife was the head of the spirit factory. I don't want you to remember some freeloader in my daughter's tiny apartment in Afula, alright?"

And, as we bade our goodbyes, Yeva broke down in tears. It was the end of an era for her.

And for us, too. For this happy Jewish family's place was our home on the road.

But the road must go on.